Treat You Like I Should

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/72617641.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
The Pitt (TV)

Relationships:
Frank Langdon/Michael "Robby" Robinavitch, Frank Langdon & Cassie McKay

Characters:
Frank Langdon, Michael "Robby" Robinavitch, Cassie McKay, Tanner Langdon, Abby Langdon and Frank Langdon's Second Child, The Pitt (TV) Ensemble

Additional Tags:
Developing Relationship, Slow Burn, Drug Addiction, Recovery, First Kiss, Sleepovers, Suicidal Thoughts, Flirting, Vignette, Jealousy, Insecurity, Sexuality Crisis, Age Difference, Masturbation, Fantasizing, Workplace Relationship, Canon Compliant, Hand Jobs, Blow Jobs, Praise Kink

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Waking Sleeping Dogs

Stats:
Published: 2025-10-17 Completed: 2025-11-20 Words: 75,883 Chapters: 10/10

Treat You Like I Should

by clownking

Summary

There are three statements of life that Langdon knows as absolute fact:

1. Langdon is a straight man. Women are gorgeous, and he has a wife whom he loves very much.
2. The painkillers he uses from the Pitt aren't the start of a bad habit. He's not an addict—just a good son recovering from a back injury sustained moving some furniture.
3. His relationship with the medical field is mutualism. He saves countless lives, takes good care of people, but he benefits as well. It keeps his head too busy to think.

Robby challenges all those assertions.

Notes

this is a slooooooow burn so. yeah. tags will change as i update

title from "late nights & heartbreak" by hannah williams & the affirmations

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Langdon stands outside of the Pitt's medical bay for a very long time. His feet are rooted to the ground like the roots in the dirt crept through the cement and strung around his shoes. If he blinks, the ghost of Robby's body crosses his vision.

Yet, through the buzzing noise in his head and flashing in-and-out blur blocking his vision, he sees that Robby isn't there anymore. He isn't coming back for him.
The whoosh of the door brings Langdon back to the world. A thin slice of hope whirls his shoulders around. The desperate and greedy shock in his body vanishes as a nurse walks out, pack of cigarettes in one hand and lighter in the other.

The taste on his tongue is bitter and warm. Like the coating of a pill he couldn't swallow. He hasn't tasted disappointment in a long time. He's become so accustomed to being the snappy senior resident—Robby's best guy.

Goddamn Robby.

Langdon pushes off the ground and marches inside. His mind flies as he gathers the rest of his items. Leaves his kids' pictures in the lockers.

He'll be back. There's still time.

For now, though, he needs to go home. Take a shower and let the water wash over how much of a clusterfuck of a day it's been. Maybe if he scrubs hard enough, he can peel away at his skin all the way down to the hypodermis. Show Robby who he really is deep down. That this is all just a misunderstanding.

A bad dream that they'll laugh about once they wake up.

Tanner pleads for a bedtime story. His tugging at his shirt is insistent, but *damn,* does it work. He lets Tanner curl up into his chest. His son's even breaths soothe the hammering of his heart as he stumbles through *Where the Wild Things Are.* Charlotte's already clonked out in

her bed in the other room, so he decides to call it a night.

As Langdon brushes his teeth, his eyes stray to Abby beside him. She's bent close to the mirror, weaving floss between her teeth. Her hair is tied up in what she calls a 'lazy bun.'

Langdon's heart starts racing. The anticipation of…something settles in his core. Like gearing up for a marathon. Leaning forward, he holds her lower back and plants a kiss on her cheek. She smiles before swatting him away, dangling the glossy floss between pinched fingers.

Langdon spends the weekend with his kids. They're delighted with his sudden desire to get out of the house. Abby keeps sending him dubious eyebrow raises. They haven't gone out in a long time.

"It's fine," he says. "I haven't had any time with them recently."

The day starts at the park. The September breeze feels nice on his neck as he watches Tanner climb up the slide.

"Wrong way, buddy," he calls from the benches.

Charlotte, her dusty brown hair dancing around in the air, seems fascinated with the sandbox. It's a rather gross contraption, but if tossing around dirty sand particles makes her giggle, then so be it.

Tanner calls to him from the top of the playground set. Wants them to go down the slide together. Standing up, Langdon groans as pain cuts up his spine.

9:18 AM. Around now is when Langdon would usually take whatever pill was in his pocket. *Damn.*

He strains to plop Tanner on his lap. As they slink down the slide, his teeth tear at the skin of his bottom lip. He thinks Tanner is laughing, but he can't hear over his own whimper.

"—ake up!"

A heavy hand rattles his shoulder. Langdon curls further into bed. Every movement is met with blazing pain. Heat thrums beneath his ribs.

"Frank! You're going to be late."

Some words tumble out of his mouth. He watches Abby in his peripheral vision raise an eyebrow. She shakes harder, bracelet clinking against her watch, and Langdon grits his teeth.

“Hey—”

A voice from somewhere howls, “Abby! I’m off!”

Warmth creeps out of his arm as Abby pulls away. “You could have just said that. I never know with you anymore.”

Langdon dives his head into the pillow. The feather count isn’t high enough to stop the high pitch pulsing in his ears.

“You don’t have to be so nasty.”

At least, that’s what he thinks she says. Three days of nearly overdosing on ibuprofen, and his sanity has begun to leak out of him. He blinks. His lashes flicker, wet and uncomfortable.

“Are you getting sick? I told you to not go out with Tanner so early.”

Langdon shakes his head. He’s not sick. There’s nothing wrong with him. He just needs some time. He’ll be back on his feet in no time, and prove Robby wrong.

He can still be good.

It’s Wednesday morning that Abby threatens to take their children from him.

“Why aren’t you at work?” Abby questions. She’s at the doorway of their bedroom. Outside. Her voice goes stern when she asks, “Frank, are you hiding something?”

“It’s not what you think.”

“I don’t know what to think. You never tell me anything!”

“There was a misunderstanding—”

“Were you fired?!”

“No—God, Abby. Nothing like that. Robby just thinks I—”

“Oh, here we go.”

Langdon, for the first time in hours, stands up. “What? What do you mean by that?”

“It’s always something about Robby. What happened now?”

He feels himself frown. “Robby didn’t do anything.”

“So, Robby didn’t do anything. You didn’t do anything. Nothing happened! You just haven’t been at work for *days* for no reason.”

Her voice echoes into the hallway. He tugs her close by arm, closing their door with a soft click.

“Robby thinks something that isn’t true.” Abby waits. She rotates her palm, signaling Langdon to hurry up. “He thinks I’m a drug addict.”

Abby’s mouth drops. “What?! Why would he think that?”

I don’t know, he could say.

The pills belong to someone else.

Please don’t leave.

In the end, it’s his wordless response that drives her out the house. She carries a sleepy Charlotte to the car, Tanner in her other hand. They’re strapped in before she circles back to him.

“You need help, Frank,” Abby says.

“Great. You believe this too? I’m telling you, it’s bullshit—”

Abby heaves an exhale. Closes her eyes as she continues. Langdon feels her slipping from his fingers.

“There’s places that can get you through this, but I’m not letting you near Tanner and Charlotte until you do. You need to get help.”

He stands, watching the car drive around the corner. Langdon waits there until he can feel his skin scorching from the sun.

His phone is warm and heavy in his palm. Robby’s contact page is burned into his screen at this point.

He feels out of place with his jeans and jacket, but the darkness of the new moon night helps him blend in. Casts a shadow over his empty

shell of a body.

The whoosh of the emergency bay doors is nearly silent under the crazy traffic of the city behind him. The emergency sign's red glow highlights the broad shoulders leaving the building.

Langdon's tongue is tacky, voice a whisper as he calls out. "Robby."

Robby turns in his direction. For the smallest moment, his typical cool expression is plastered on his face. It feels like a normal night. Like Langdon hasn't fucked up his life and Robby still thinks he's the best.

But then, the reality of five days ago crashes, turning Robby's mouth down and filling his eyes with a renewed anger.

"Thought I told you to go home, Frank."

Sweat beads at his neck as he stumbles over his words. "I know. I messed up—"

"This shit again?"

Robby's shoulder tilts away, like some indication that he's about to step away.

Langdon *cannot* live with that.

He'll accept anger, and disappointment, and any other negative emotion Robby wants to throw at him.

Anything. So long as he doesn't leave.

"I need help."

"You already know how to get help. The 30 day inpatient—"

"Yes! Yes, I'll go."

The haste creaking in his words must confuse Robby. He tilts his head, minutely, staring at Langdon. It hurts that he didn't look this stumped when he found Langdon's pills.

"All of it?"

"Yeah. Robby, I—" Langdon swallows, his breath leaving him in more waves and coming back in pathetic drips. "Whatever it takes. Just don't…."

He can't bring himself to say it. Shaking his head, Langdon risks a look up. Robby has turned fully to him, shoulders sagged. His bag is nearly falling off his arm.

"Alright."

"Wait. I need to go home first."

"Fine. Let's go."

The ride in Robby's Wrangler is quiet. They're each chewing on their own thoughts. He's always wanted a chance inside Robby's head. A mere glimpse at what the sun would look like up close. Something tells Langdon he doesn't want to know what Robby's thinking about now.

It hurts even more that the feeling is mutual. Past praises and leading questions plague his mind.

"What do you think, Doctor Langdon?"

"Doctor Langdon's patient. Doctor Langdon's call."

"Nice save, Doctor Langdon."

"Frank."

His eyes blink open. The cold steps to his house are illuminated by the street lamp. He looks over to Robby's face, dark and untouched by the light. The car is drowned in the night's cruel blue.

"Get your things."

Langdon feels his head nod. Palms the handle and swings the door open. Looks back at Robby who nods for him to go inside.

The AC blasts across his face as he opens his front door. The darkness covers the furniture like a thick layer of dust. It's unfamiliar and not at all home.

Quick steps on the wooden floor echo from the hallway. Langdon's heart skips. Maybe one of his kids is going to be bounding around the corner to hug his legs.

He's not expecting the goldendoodle puppy that races toward him instead.

“Seriously?” He mutters to himself. Crouched down, the puppy licks across his face. Langdon pushes a large palm into the puppy’s head, turning it away and wiping the line of saliva off his cheek. The puppy snuggles into his hand, petting itself.

Abby must have dropped the little thing off. Sure enough, he sees the letter stuck under a napkin holder on the kitchen table. His eyes skip every other word, reaches the bottom, then reads through the letter in its entirety.

There’s a pee pad by the backyard door that the puppy completely missed. He cleans up the area. Sprays all the chemical cleaners he owns and scrubs. Just to prolong the inevitable.

Or maybe he’s always been obsessive about the quality of his work. He’s not really sure who he is at the moment.

He fits his belongings into one messy cardboard box. Shoved his zip-up jacket and jeans and socks and tooth brush into one container, relying on hopes and delusions to make sure it doesn’t overflow.

As he jams more of his belongings into the single box, the corner of the cardboard snags his bracelet. His heart drops, and in the next second, the beads scatter across the ground. The sound of plastic rolling on the floor sends him into a panic.

His only tether to his family. To the thing that keeps him going. What makes him such a great man. It’s strewed all around him.

The golden doodle starts sniffing at the remains. Its mouth gnaws at one of the colorful beads, and Langdon has to scurry across the ground to pick the thing up.

He has to do *something* with this dog, so he sits the puppy on top of his belongings. A pair of socks drop, and Langdon’s in too much pain to bend down to pick them back up.

The letter is left on the table. He won’t let this be the last of it. He’s going to do this stupid program. See his kids again. Prove Abby wrong. Make Robby proud.

His fingers reach for the light switch instinctively as he walks out. He lets his hand instead drift down to close the door, and he looks out for Robby’s car.

For a brief moment, Langdon’s already racing heart stutters to a stop.

He can't spot Robby's car. But when he does, the sight is haunting.

Robby is leaned back in his seat. Both hands are curled on his face, blocking his expression. Langdon has to brace himself to open the car door.

He tumbles into the car, tripping over nothing. The puppy curls into his neck, paws scratching at his collar. Robby jolts and looks over at the commotion.

They stare at each other. Langdon can't see much through the tuft of golden curls, but he thinks this may be the first time he's seen genuine shock on Robby's face. His eyes are doe-shaped and mouth wide enough to showcase the flat of his tongue.

Langdon swallows as Robby stretches across the passenger seat to open the door.

"So…uhm." Langdon begins.

"That for your kids?" Robby asks, moving back to his side of the car. There's still an impression of Robby's body in the space Langdon scoots into.

"Yeah. Guess Abby had different ideas."

Langdon stares at the puppy's round eyes. It keeps looking around, lost and curious. It hits Langdon like a truck. "I don't think Abby expected me to actually get admitted."

They ride in silence for an hour and some change. Langdon watches the city disappear in his side mirror as Robby heads through more rural land.

Nearing midnight, Robby pulls over on a deserted road for the puppy to use the bathroom. The vertigo shakes up the nerves in Langdon's stomach. The puppy sniffs the ground, and Langdon throws himself at a nearby bush in the opposite direction.

His throat constricts as his vile trickles out his mouth. It's mostly murky liquid like dirty water. He hasn't eaten all day.

Breathing becomes a struggle as he chokes on the stench of his stomach acid. Over his shoulder, he sees Robby watching him with indifference. Eyebrows raised, he appears almost *pleased* at Langdon's sickness.

Puffing air, Langdon wipes at his mouth with the back of his shaky hand. The pain in his spine strikes again, and he curls back up.

The puppy trots over and attempts to stick its nose in his vomit. He swipes a hand down and carries the puppy like a package, tucked against his side.

Robby watches him buckle in, and it's like pinpricks. A tattoo gun jutting in and out of his skin, burning him with permanent attention. Goosebumps tapping under his skin.

Or maybe it's the withdrawal symptoms finally setting in. Every sensation's attacking his nerves now that he isn't suppressing them. All he knows for a fact is that Robby's recognition has always felt like the relief the pills brought.

But now, Robby's eyes on him send him into a panic. He taps his foot against the passenger seat space. Maybe if he keeps going at the rate he's at, he'll catch the car on fire and explode them both.

"I'm fine," Langdon says, in lieu of nothing.

Robby sticks a palm to his socket, rubbing at the spot. He groans, deep and annoyed. A sound that sets Langdon on edge.

"First time seeing vomit? You're so soft. It's your own fault for wearing your heart on your sleeve."

There's a tired sigh from beside him. Langdon thinks he hears him mumble something under his breath, but the car starts again, and the slow drift into drive juggles the bare contents of his stomach again.

The rest of the ride is silent, but Langdon hears himself shuffling around as he fights against his body. He locks his focus on the road. If he looks anywhere else, the nausea churning in his esophagus may bubble over and out.

He's so concentrated on sparing himself, maintaining his very last shred of dignity in front of Robby, that he doesn't process Robby helping him check into the facility. Doesn't realize he's alone until he's staring at the ceiling of his new room.

He doesn't remember the last thing he said to Robby. Can't seem to recall the last thing Robby said to *him*.

A snivel escapes his mouth. That may have been the last time he

would ever see Robby. The final moment in which Robby tolerated his presence, and he can't fucking remember it because he was too zoned into his own pain and misery.

The silence mocks him.

He used to be a doctor. Successful. Busy. Always bouncing from room to room saving life after life.

Now, Langdon moves at a snail's pace, unable to keep the shards of his own life from crumbling out of his hands. The humiliation is worse than the trembling, nauseous, restless energy that eats him alive.

He learns about the program throughout his first day. It's some place called Mindful Bridge Recovery Center. Not the average, twelve-step recovery program he's watched his own patients with addictions be admitted to.

There's a mental health focus as well to the program, founded by a combination of behavioral management and physical therapy.

It may be a reason they prioritize seeing their therapist every day. He's not sure how Robby found such a hippie-dippie place so quickly.

"You can call me Alanna," his new therapist introduces.

He sweats through his first appointment, too busy fighting down the nausea to be amazed by her silky, jet black hair. Or to appreciate her kindness as she passes a tissue for him to dab away the chunk of his breakfast off his face.

"You're a doctor, so I'm sure you understand. Everything you say or do is confidential unless you plan on harming yourself or another person."

"Not sure I'm in any position to be doing any of that," he huffs, unable to stop the anger from curling at the edge of his words.

When his vision isn't coming in and out, his shaking hands fill the view in front of him.

He's lashing out at the hand that's feeding him, but Alanna doesn't seem to mind. She's smiling and nodding like she's not afraid of his bites.

And maybe that's what he needs right now. A stable, fearless body to

keep him in check. Someone that's not frightened off by the worst of him.

He used to think maybe Robby could be that person. Now he's sure that will never be the case.

The physical therapist reminds him of Dana. Older with short, chopped hair. Sarcastic but beaming with pride when Langdon does something right.

She starts off by poking all the places that hurt. Right now, through the bitching pain of withdrawal, that's everywhere. Her manicured finger prods at his spine, and he hisses through his teeth.

They think he may have exacerbated the pain by ignoring the underlying problem. Using medication to dull the pain instead of treating it at the source.

All Langdon hears is that it's his fault he's in this predicament, and well…maybe it is.

"How am I supposed to exercise if I can barely move my body without hurting?" Langdon seethes, curling away from her hand.

Stephanie, his new physical therapist, leans back, with both hands on her waist. "We'll start you off slow. You used to run, yes? It should not take too long for you to see much progress."

The idea of moving anywhere outside the four walls of his shared dorm has him groaning. Except, he remembers Robby's face in the car, sharp shadows highlighting his steep frown.

Fuck Robby, Langdon thinks as an attendee escorts him to the main room. If this is just another test—another medical procedure or a new lecture to absorb, then so be it. He'll pass with flying colors like always.

Robby won't have the balls to accuse him of being an addict after his thirty day stint.

His resolve is quick to diminish after his ability to sleep. Langdon lasts nearly three restless days before his body shuts down for a brief two hour nap.

In the meantime, Langdon thinks he has cussed out about every

employee on his floor through chattering teeth.

Complaints about the suffocating temperature go in one ear and out the other. Especially when twenty minutes later Langdon nearly throws his sweatshirt across the room in an attempt to cool off.

It's just another side effect of the withdrawals, after all.

They redirect all his bitchings to the therapist. She smiles at him and talks, but he can't listen. Says the insomnia will cure itself with time.

I know, he almost fusses. He's a doctor. The process of withdrawal is all too familiar to him. Except this time, he's joined hands with the damn thing. A one-on-one, first-hand lesson.

Langdon refutes her every attempt at praise. He can't be proud of himself when he can hardly walk down the hallway without his leg spasming.

Especially not when the shame burns brighter than any physical injury.

This must have been how Robby saw me, Langdon thinks with a snide smile. Chucking up a good portion of his stomach on some unlit back roads, sweat prickling down his face, and promises that he doesn't have any sort of problem.

She says it's progress. That he is already on step four of five on some Transtheoretical Model. He's accepted the fact that his behavior is dangerous and requires change. He's taking steps to alter that behavior and is consistent in his intentions to succeed.

He's not sure there will ever be a time where he can believe her, no matter what medical jargon she tries to use to tailor the lesson to him.

The exercises help. Even if he can't accomplish a quarter of what he used to on the pills. Stephanie compliments his flexibility as she helps him push into another demanding butterfly stretch.

At the end of the week, he knocks out in his bed for the first time his entire stay. He even manages to sleep through his roommates' obnoxious snoring with visions of strong hands molding his body.

His flu-like sweats have been rearing their ugly head less and less. It allows Langdon to appreciate the things in life he didn't know he

missed. Like the sun soaking into his bones.

Fuck, he thinks, *does it feel nice to bask in light.*

The autumn air is brisk against his neck, but they don't allow him outside for long. He lets the breeze send chills down his spine while he can. It's been so long since he's had a moment to stop. Let time flow past him instead of climbing from one demanding task to the next.

A husky groan from his side stirs Langdon out of his daydreaming. He looks over and sees his roommate slide into the chair beside him.

"Too fucking cold for this," Donny grumbles. He's leaned back like he's just come home from his taxing cubicle job, beer in hand and game on the TV.

"Nah," Langdon simply argues.

"Hey."

Langdon looks over. Donny's face is set strangely. He's always appeared overly formal, back straight and expression tight, but now, he's leaned close to Langdon like he's got a secret to share.

"Know anyone who could get me something?"

His mouth drops open. Feels the crisp air suck the moisture from his tongue.

"We're in rehab, Donny."

"Yeah, but no one here's buying this shit," Donny says. He leans in close, a side of his lip curled up into a smirk. "I'm only here 'cause my wife wants me. Said she'd turn me into the bar association if I didn't."

Langdon stares at the body in front of him. "You've got three little girls at home," Langdon hears himself whisper.

Donny shrugs. "Daddy's on a work trip. That ain't nothing new. Man, you're a goober."

His eyes stare at the vacant spot Donny leaves as he tracks down another resident. For the first time in weeks, the anger boiling in his gut feels like his own.

Alanna congratulates him on his final day.

Langdon hesitates, but he forces himself to ask “am I on my own?”

“Do you want to be?”

He thinks about the month he spent at the facility. How he couldn’t stand without leaning against the wall or another attending. Stephanie’s strong hands kneading and pushing Langdon’s body to its peak. The kind and cruel words exchanged in Alanna’s office.

“I…I don’t know.”

Thankfully, Alanna must understand what he’s grasping at, even though he’s not entirely sure of his own desires. She places her work number into his cellphone.

“This goes straight to my office. We can meet however often you would like. All you need is to call.”

Langdon cranes his head down, feeling heat rise to his neck and face. Without a word, he nods and packs his belongings into his mother’s car. He can’t face his mom but can still feel her sensitive eyes on him.

After two days at his parents’ house, Langdon starts looking into apartments. He can’t stand their knitted eyebrows and sorrowful eyes as he takes his dinner to his room. Confining himself to his bedroom, surrounded by his high school track medals, is not the most ideal setting for recovery.

He’s not that self-destructive to want to stay here. Not anymore, anyway.

After eleven days, Langdon packs a few boxes into his beat up car. He moves into the first apartment that gives him a call. It’s dingy, in a sketchy area, and probably doesn’t have any working faucets, but it’s close enough to the hospital and within the price range. He needs to make this work.

After twenty days, a divorce notice, and an emergency furniture hunt, Langdon calls the number on the card Alanna had handed him.

As the dial rings, his argument with Abby over the phone replays in his head.

“I don’t know if I can trust you again, Frank.”

“Abby, I haven’t had anything in weeks—”

“You put yourself at risk. And me as well. I probably could have forgiven all of that, Frank. But you got Tanner and Charlotte involved.”

“I would never do anything to hurt them.”

“You already did.”

The line is quiet, a mechanical humming steady on her end. Langdon fiddles with the string of his zip-up hoodie.

“You know the worst part…the worst part is that you didn’t even come to me about this. I—I never even knew! You didn’t trust me to help you, or I was just too naive to see it. I mean, somehow, your boss knew a whole week before I even got a clue.”

Langdon can’t find the words to respond. Doesn’t know for once the right things to say, and he’s not sure Abby is expecting him to.

“I think it’s best if we take some time apart, Frank. I’ll have someone contact you.”

When the dial falls silent, Langdon’s breath holds in his throat. He may just throw up again.

“Office of Alanna Flores.”

“Alanna…it’s Frank Langdon.”

The line is silent, and Langdon’s finger hovers over the ‘end’ button until—

“I’m glad you called.”

It takes a few weeks, but Langdon works up the courage to attend a local Narcotics Anonymous meeting. ‘Local’ means a thirty minute drive, but if he takes the T, he can transit for half the time and jog for the other half.

Alanna’s encouraged him to maintain his exercise regimen. *Routine is key,* she had said. Alongside the fact his back pain has improved, it seems like a motivating plan to get him out. Beats sitting at home staring at the wall with no one to talk to and nothing to work towards.

Yet, Langdon sits down in the circle with a hammering heart and dry mouth and wishes he was back at his crusty apartment. His leg bobs up and down like a pecking hummingbird.

Tears of shame sting his eyes. He can't get through his introduction. There's some sounds coming out of him in a weak attempt to verbalize some variation of his name. He keeps his head down as the group moves onto the next person.

They don't ask him to speak for the rest of the meeting. He floats through the old timer's stories like he's a ghost spectating the new family that's just moved into his space.

There's a distinct loneliness in his chest. He's surrounded by people he's never met before. He hears their tales, their messages and words of advice, but they pass through him.

At the end, he's the first to stand up. The chair squeaks against the floor as he backs up. The exit calls his name, and he's so close to slipping out until.

A thin hand clasps around his elbow. He turns around, about to shake off the touch, but his eyes move down to see an older gentleman staring back at him.

The grip on his arm tightens, and *damnit, how does a seventy year old man have this much strength,* before he releases Langdon.

"Leaving fast, aren't you?"

"Uhh, yeah. I've got somewhere to be."

"No, you don't."

Langdon glares, refusing to let his mouth drop at the audacious words. "Excuse me?"

"Come with me." The older man exits the building and heads toward a maroon SUV.

Langdon lets the chilly air blast across his face as he steps outside. He could turn the opposite direction. Head home and never come back.

Except, he's done stupider things in the name of curiosity, so he slides into the passenger side of the stranger's car and watches the road run beneath them.

Twenty minutes later, they park outside a diner and sit across from each other at a booth. The older man orders a black coffee. Langdon mutters for some water.

“Gregory,” the older man says after the waiter walks away.

“I’m Lan—,” he stops. It’s a habit. “Frank’s fine.” Holds out a cautious hand, but Gregory waves it away.

The waiter is quick to come back with their drinks. Gregory nods before tearing open twelve packets of sugar.

“You should avoid having so much sugar,” Langdon says. It slips from his thoughts, and he’s surprised with himself. He’s usually better at controlling his mouth.

Everything he used to do was with well-timed intention. Now, he fumbles through interactions, questioning every move.

“What are you, a doctor?”

Langdon scoffs. “Yeah, I am.” His interaction with Robby in the ambulance bay pops into his head, and the comment loses its humor.

“Well, you’re also an addict.”

His rebuttal is immediate. “No, I’m not.”

Gregory looks up at him for the first time since coming inside the diner. “You think just ‘cause you haven’t had any pills for a few weeks means you didn’t do any of the shit you did when you were on ‘em?”

He chews on some words that sound right. Tries to say that he *hasn’t* had anything for *months.* Or maybe that he needs to be clean for kids. Maybe mention how he’s a respected doctor just going through a rough patch.

Except, he’s not sure if that last statement is true. He has no idea *if* Robby will even take him back. Even though he followed the program and regimens with perfect obedience, Robby could still deny him. Take away the last thing he’s good at. What gave him respect. The only part of his life he had any control over.

“Fucking Robby,” Langdon drawls out into his palm.

“We all got ugly sides of us,” Gregory says. He stirs what must be a thousand grains of sugar in his cup. “Don’t mean that's all of us.”

“I’m a doctor,” Langdon mumbles. “I’ve got two kids and a…wife. It’s not like I could….”

“You sure got a lotta labels,” Gregory grumbles into his cup. It’s piping hot, steam blocking any expression on his face.

“Well…yeah.” Langdon taps the side of his cup. The winter freeze is sharp against the window, but the condensation on his cup still wets his finger.

“Ever thought about just existing.”

Langdon frowns. *What the fuck did I get into?* “Yeah, sure,” he comments.

Gregory matches his glower, not impressed. “You’re so focused on being some big man for your family and friends and patients, that you got nothing left for yourself. Probably how you ended up here to begin with.”

Langdon opens his mouth to argue back. Defend his honor, because he is the man of his house. Provides for his family, and helps his parents on the weekends, and stays sharp on the medical literature to help any patient that crosses paths with him.

There’s a rabbit hole he goes down. Memories that trace back through the rehab facility. He sees flashes of Robby’s anger, disappointment, and shocking lack of surprise.

And there’s his time at the Pitt, hopping between patients and gabbing with other workers before going home exhausted to Abby and the kids.

At some point, in between all those recollections, an extra pill had slipped into Langdon’s hand. The pain was too unbearable to deny the call. And if he had nothing to do, maybe he would have waited it out.

But zipping back to the present, Langdon sees the past unfurl. Running his kids to school and keeping a roof above his family’s head. Staying alert for his patients and getting them the help they were begging for.

Being quick enough on his feet to get patients moving. So quick and impressive and smart that Robby notices his brilliance. Just to hear another job well done slip through his lips.

Langdon stares at his cup. For the first time in a while, the tremors in his legs have stopped. His entire body has entered a paralyzed state. He watches his body hover in the three dimensional space.

A finger plucks an ice cube out of his cup and chucks it at his forehead. The ice plops into his lap, staining the top of his denim pants.

“What the hell?” Langdon looks up to see Gregory frowning.

“Sorry, were you drinking that?”

“You’re kind of an asshole, man.”

Gregory breaks out into a grin. “Yeah, my grandkids say that to me a lot. Wish that meant they’d quit comin’ around to bug my ass every Sunday.”

Langdon picks up his cup. The cold exterior feels nice against his burning skin. Makes him feel a little bit more alive. He motions to take a sip before remembering wrinkly fingers dipped in his cup. His face sours, and Gregory laughs at him.

“Will you come back?” He asks.

“You’re not going to kidnap me again and drag me back?”

Gregory’s face narrows as he leans in close. “This whole thing works a lot better if you take responsibility for it. Doesn’t do so well if you only come by because some old man barks at you to do so.”

Langdon thinks back on what Alanna said. Something about intentions and conviction. He shrugs after a moment.

“I don’t have much else to do. Guess I could stop by.”

Gregory doesn’t buy his casual attitude, he can tell, but he must consider it a win. They drink in silence for a while, and Langdon watches the people walk outside.

Chapter End Notes

this is a set up for the more juicer robbylangdon parts so stick

with me y'all

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> for anyone who already read this, this is just chapter one but i split it up for easier reading :) sorry for any confusion

Langdon's run his third lap around the park. It would be impressive if the path was long, but it's a small thing located in the heart of the city. He's just grateful to have a place to run at all.

Winters in Pittsburg linger in the air. Despite the leaves peaking out of the sticks, threatening to blossom, Langdon still sees his breath fog up his vision as he pants. He doesn't mind. The chill feels great through his gear.

Slowing his pace to a walk, he decides to extend his journey to the main parts of the city. Maybe scroll on his phone in the cafe and avoid thinking about how much he misses his kids.

Gregory and Alanna have officially become the most obnoxious duo in his life despite the fact they have never met. Both, in their own ways, (Gregory using much stronger, vile language), have suggested he acknowledge thoughts that he is trying to ignore. Face the problem head on instead of burying it underneath a pile of work.

Much easier said than done. But he has no work to busy himself with, so he reluctantly agrees to their plan.

There's a large chain bookstore that catches his attention. As he walks in, the scent of coffee hits him immediately. The inside is insulated, the heater's warmth hugging his every side.

He browses the nonfiction shelves. His fingers skin some of the medical books before he bumps into another person.

"Oh, sorry about that," the person says.

"No worries."

Langdon looks up. He's filled with almost instantaneous dread.

"Oh, Langdon! Hey."

He steps back. It feels as though the shelves have grown, blocking him

in. A lump clogs his throat. All trains of thought pause in their tracks, leaving Langdon with an empty head and mouth.

“Uhm, are you okay?” Doctor McKay steps closer, a hesitant hand floating in the air. “Robby had said you took a sick leave. I didn't think it was *this* bad.”

“I’m not sick,” Langdon swears. He tumbles over his words. He had forgotten people in the past still existed, and now one of them was standing in front of him. “Not like that.”

“I’d hope not. You do look pretty pale, though.” McKay narrows her eyes at him, and he can’t help but think she can see all the parts of him that he hates. “Let’s sit down somewhere and you can tell me all about it.”

“I wouldn’t want to…bother you on your day off,” Langdon mumbles, backpedaling.

McKay shakes her head. “Harrison’s doing a book report for class. Neither of us get any work done at home. Too many distractions, you know? So, we’re stuck here for a while.”

“Ahh,” Langdon says, uselessly. He watches McKay walk toward one of the two person tables by the window.

“Unless you got somewhere to be?”

His lips press together. He’s gotten real bad at lying, because he shakes his head and follows McKay.

She sets down her cup, leaning back in her chair. “Should I start with everything you’ve missed? I know it’s typical for an ER to be crazy, but it’s been a *mess*—”

“I’m an addict.”

Langdon feels like his heart is about to crawl up his throat. He doesn’t realize he’s admitted to it until the air between them gets thin. He can’t breath, can’t look up at McKay, can’t do fucking anything.

“Oh. Oh, wow,” she says.

“I’m not sick,” Langdon repeats. “It’s not like however Robby uhh… said it.”

“Yeah, Robby definitely didn’t mention that.”

Fucking Robby, Langdon thinks for the thousandth time. He can't help the minute appreciation that creeps into his mind at the fact that it seems that Robby hasn't spread his business.

Maybe it means there's still a place for Langdon at the Pitt. That maybe, in the future, he can come back to Robby's side. Be that good doctor Robby knows he can be.

Maybe this was all just a sick fever dream. He'll wake up back on that September morning and realize it was a twisted joke his subconscious played on him.

But he knows that would never happen. He has already changed too much to go back.

And there's more change to come as well. For his kids, for Abby, for Robby. Maybe for his own wellbeing too, if he wants to to think about himself as someone who deserves a kinder version of himself.

"You're in a program?" McKay asks. She's quicker to the uptake than he thought she would be.

Not that McKay isn't brilliant, but she's the first person Langdon's interacted with from the past. He was sure most people were going to tiptoe around the subject, like a bad ketchup stain on the collar of his shirt.

Langdon ends up spilling his story to her. About the past few months with Gregory, and Alanna. The physical therapy and occasional tinges of back pain that send him into a panic.

How Robby didn't seem surprised by his addiction, and how a goddamn *newbie* sniffed him out.

"Sometimes it just takes a fresh set of eyes to see something you kept denying."

Langdon feels tears burning at his eyes. He *really* cannot afford another hit to his dignity. He turns away to the window. The snow outside has long turned to an ugly sludge of mud and dirt.

"That's what happened to me," McKay says into the void. Langdon peeks at her from the corner of his eye. She takes a casual sip of her drink, like she hadn't just confessed something that still constricts Langdon's throat shut. Like he's stuffed to the brim with shame and guilt just *thinking* about it. "I lost custody of Harrison when he was

young. I mean real young. It took a long time, but I finally got help. I just passed ten years sober."

He feels his mouth drop. "That's…incredible. I don't think I could do that."

"Give yourself some grace," Mckay says. "Look how far you've come already."

Langdon sighs. His breath fogs up the window. If Charlotte were here, she'd poke at the glass to draw little figures.

"McKay," Langdon says. "I miss my kids."

"That's the toughest part," she says. There's a sad smile on her lips.

"I missed Halloween, Christmas. Fuck, McKay, I even missed Tanner's birthday, because I was puking in some facility hours away."

"Never apologize for bettering yourself for your kids."

"It doesn't feel like that right now."

"A lot of things change."

"Yeah, it does."

They stare at each other, and for the first time in weeks, Langdon doesn't feel a panicky weight in his chest.

"Why don't I give you my number?"

"As much as I'd love to, I'm still a married man," Langdon teases.

Well, sort of. What she doesn't know won't hurt her.

McKay rolls her eyes. "You are not my type."

"Too handsome?"

"Too much of a dick."

Langdon smirks, sliding his unlocked phone over. As she types his number in, Harrison trots over, book in hand.

"Mom, I finished."

McKay wraps an arm around his neck, eyes locked on the phone. "Did

you? Why don't you tell Doctor Langdon what you read about."

As McKay types her number into Langdon's phone, Harrison blabs about the nocturnal animals book he read. Langdon learns some freaky facts about owls and gets some sense of normalcy.

Alanna thinks befriending McKay was a leap in the right direction. Someone who shares Langdon's past and can provide support while also seeing him as more than just his addiction.

It's refreshing. As much as the NA meetings and the people there have helped him, it's good to have an actual friend. It's forced him to realize that he didn't really *have* any friends. After undergrad, all of his frat brothers parted ways as he moved onto medical school. He had starved himself of human contact besides Abby, who had been his life line. His nose was kept to the books until residency where he met the people at the Pitt who had taken him in—oddities and all.

Robby was his one of his only genuine friends. And as much as the self-deprecation is convincing him it was just some pathetic, one-sided adoration, he knows Robby had felt the same about him. Every flash of that rare, full-teeth smile confirmed it.

And Langdon went and shattered that trust.

"You never know," McKay says through bites. There's some condiment stain on her upper lip. "It seems like he's cheering you on."

Langdon stares at his own sloppy burger. He hasn't had a filthy, greasy burger in a *long* time. The way McKay is plowing through her meal must mean she hasn't either.

"Has he mentioned me at all?" He's aware of how desperate it sounds, but his curiosity is killing him.

McKay raises an eyebrow before wiping at her mouth with the back of a hand. "No. Actually, it's kind of the opposite. Anytime someone mentions your name, he practically runs in the opposite direction."

"Great. What every guy wants to hear."

Langdon abandons his burger. His stomach is churning, and suddenly his appetite has shrunk.

"Robby's going through his own healing too." McKay pops a few fries

in her mouth. “When my mother found out, she wouldn’t talk to me for weeks. She was *furious.* I was mad at her too, because it felt like she was abandoning me.”

Langdon looks up, and McKay’s smiling. “Why do you look so happy about it?”

“Hindsight’s a bitch. I was so obsessed with my own anger that I didn’t have space in my head to realize she was going through something too. Imagine your kid was developing an addiction, and you didn’t even notice.”

Charlotte and her chubby, rosy cheeks pops into his head. Tanner, and his messy, dirty blonde strands that never stick down. He can’t imagine what they’ll look like when they grow up. Who they’ll resemble more.

He hopes it isn’t him.

“Yeah,” he mutters, just to say something. Then, “are you saying that Robby feels like that?”

McKay shrugs. “Maybe. It could be a bunch of things. All I know is that he’s avoiding it in his typical Robby ways.”

He rolls his eyes, and an angry sort of pride strikes him. The idea that he may be doing even slightly better at something than Robby. “That doesn’t sound like him at all.”

“Give him time.”

“I need him to see that I’m getting better.”

“He will,” she placates.

Langdon doesn’t think she will understand. There’s no amount or depth of words he can use to describe how badly he needs Robby’s approval. Even after unfolding his desperation with Alanna, it doesn’t make it fade away.

In fact, he thinks his resolve has tripled.

Abby’s lawyer contacts him the same day he receives an email from PTMC. It’s entirely coincidental.

The email states his first day back will be Monday, July 6th. He’s to

bring a printout of his lab results which prove his sobriety. There's also an attached email detailing how his last year of residency has been extended to cover the time he has missed in his absence.

He's not entirely too surprised that the Pitt is taking him back without any hesitation. The rate of addiction in healthcare is astronomical compared to other fields.

The dropout and understaff percentages are even worse. They're desperate and take any willing person they can get their hands on. Even if that person is fresh out of rehab from stealing the hospital's own medication.

He switches gears and focuses on the call he just had with the lawyer. Once Langdon shows he has steady employment, Abby will agree to joint custody. Supervised until Langdon proves himself.

As if he wasn't handling his own kids just fine, but whatever. If that's what Abby needs to see that he's a fit adult, then so be it.

He vents this to McKay over the phone.

"It's all formality," she says, voice crinkled. "Doesn't make it any less annoying."

"You got that right. I mean, they're *my* kids too."

He doesn't mention that Charlotte barely wants to see him, hesitant to speak over the phone. Tanner's sorting through his own bundle of emotions that he's too young to understand. Or express in a way that any of them can interpret easily.

"I hear you," McKay says.

Langdon props his legs onto the coffee table. One sweet benefit of living alone is that no one can complain about how he sits. No one is here to swat at his feet as he tries to relax.

"Hey, guess who's coming back soon."

"No way. You got your start date?"

"Mmm. July 6th."

There's a pause. Some rustling, too. "That's pretty soon. Good for you! Are you excited?"

“I’ve nearly lost my sanity from boredom.”

McKay laughs. “You’ll get real sick of the ER after an hour.”

“Is that a bet I’m hearing? I’m more than happy to put a price to it.”

“Forgot you’re wired differently than the rest of us. If someone isn’t bleeding or screaming, you don't want it.”

Langdon feels himself break into a grin. “Hey, want to come over to celebrate? Netflix just added the older seasons of *Wipeout.*”

“*Wipeout?* God, you sound old.”

“Aren’t you older than me?”

Usually, Langdon knows better than to comment on someone’s age, especially a woman’s. But McKay’s like a cousin at this point. A cousin he would randomly have a sleepover with when he was really young. There's an instinctive similarity between them that makes it incredibly easy to get along.

“Sorry, which one of us was listening to *Eurythmics* on his run yesterday?”

He rolls his eyes. It was a mistake telling McKay that he got emotional listening to *‘Here Comes the Rain Again.’* The memories of Robby meeting his eyes across the ER came crashing in when the verse hit. Sue him for being in touch with his emotions now.

“Listening to more modern music doesn’t make you better than me.”

“I’ll be over in an hour, *‘lover boy’.*”

Langdon groans as the call ends. He sets aside any thoughts he may have about his start date and cleans up the house instead.

The phone buzzes in his hands as Langdon scrolls through a journal article. It’s work. Someone who creates the scheduling for their department. One of the residents called out sick with the flu right before the Fourth of July holiday, and they are requesting (forcing) Langdon to come in two days early.

It’s July 3rd when Langdon receives this news.

That night, Langdon triple checks everything. He’s never doubted his

own work before, but it's been a long time since he's felt like himself.

He's only been acquainted with the part of himself that was coping with pills. The old him is locked away somewhere, creeping back out like the sun inching above the horizon on a bright new day.

His lab report is sealed in an envelope on the kitchen table. The scrubs he plans on wearing are packed in his bag. A jacket and pair of jeans lay on the chair in his bedroom.

He has to dress casually for his meeting with HR in the morning. They don't appreciate their employees walking in with scrubs like they work in a hospital.

He tucks himself into bed early, because he knows he won't get much sleep.

Several hours of tossing and turning proves him right. Any deep sleep he does achieve is plagued with memories of Robby. His face is distorted, or blurred.

Most of the time, he thinks he sees the sharp shadows of a frown, but the beard hides a lot from him. His arms are strong as they peak from under the navy zip up.

His eyes blink open at 5:37 AM. He has no choice but to get up now. He doesn't want to face another Robby before he absolutely has to.

He does text McKay about the freaky dream. Blobbed visions of Robby haunting him around every corner.

McKay [06:34 AM]: sounds like someone's got a crush

Langdon gasps. His fingers hover over the keyboard. They circle different letters before deciding on:

Langdon [06:35 AM]: What?????

There's a sudden twitchiness to his body. It's new. Not like the nerves he's been feeling all morning, and definitely not the low grade ache for a pill that sometimes still nips at him. This is a different beast altogether. Hungry, and warm in his chest.

The toaster his parents gifted him dings behind him. He mistakes it as a text notification, and grabs at his phone.

After remembering he's not some lovestruck teenager, he pockets the

device and spreads some scrambled eggs on the toast.

He eats, then throws away the paper plate he ate off of. McKay's text buzzes in his pocket.

She sent a shrug emoji.

Fantastic.

After a few seconds, she sends:

McKay [06:37 AM]: That's what my dad used to tell me before I told him it was BS

Langdon rubs a hand across his forehead. It's too similar to how Robby's hand drags down his face whenever he's exasperated. Like touching a hot stove, Langdon yanks his hand down.

Langdon [06:38 AM]: Why would you tell me this right before I see him????

McKay sends a laughing emoji. She loves those goddamn emojis, even if she uses the wrong ones at the wrong times. Langdon closes his phone, and if it didn't cost half of his rent, he'd chuck the thing across the room.

There's no time to think about McKay's sick sense of humor. Instead, he busies himself with getting dressed for work. He parts his hair and fluffs it in a way that screams 'effortlessly handsome' despite the fact it takes him ten minutes to calm down the unruly strands.

On the way out, he throws on his Pittsburgh Penguins cap, pushes his ring and sobriety bracelet onto his left hand, and slams the door shut. He can't let himself think about this any longer or he's never going to make it out the door. His system is kicked into fight-or-flight. Blood rushes in his ears, pounding, pounding, as he darts to the ER.

Lupe sits behind the ward desk. She's scanning something on the computer before she opens her mouth near the microphone.

Her voice stops at the sight of Langdon approaching. They stare at each other through the industrial-grade glass. She raises her eyebrows but buzzes him back.

He's never been shy at the ER before. This used to be his domain. He ruled this place.

And now, after some illegal pills he stole to help his withdrawal from the legally prescribed pills, he can barely take two steps without trembling.

Those fucking pills suppressed his emotions, and now that they're back, his hands are full with their intensity. He doesn't know how to regulate.

He gives a small nod before walking towards the back. As he walks in, his warm palm heats up the envelope clutched tight in his hand.

Despite the AC blasting across his face, he still feels flushed. Like a new form of stage fright has consumed him.

People are staring. Either through him or at the envelope. There's a distinct, new feeling of wanting to crawl out of his skin and hide.

"36 year old Thomas Burleigh. Front-seat passenger in car crash. Tachycardic. Glass shards to the right arm."

Emergency service personnel rush past him in a flash of black and blue. A doctor Langdon's never seen before plasters herself to the side of the gurney.

Her sharp cheekbones duck beneath a bundle of brown curls. She unravels the stethoscope from around her neck, moves in tandem with the EMTs as they park the patient in one of the trauma rooms.

"Mr. Burleigh, I'm Doctor Al-Hashimi. How are you feeling?" Her voice fades as the doors swing shut.

Must be the new attending McKay told him about. Just another piece of this place that is unrecognizable to him.

Langdon resumes his steps, picks up his pace even, and forces himself to breathe as he starts to move in front of the nurse's station.

"Ahhh, the prodigal son returns."

He pauses, foot stuck out like he's trying to trip someone. Craning his neck, he sees a night shift nurse, Lena, peering up at him with a grin. His eyes bug out as he notices Dana beside her. She's avoiding his gaze, staring down at the paper they were glancing over before.

He feels small. A toy in a claw machine plucked from the pile. Langdon nods his head, worrying his lips together, before sprinting to

the lockers.

He changes into his work attire. His scrubs are cold and unused with a strong waft of detergent. The thought that there will without a doubt be blood stains and grime on his uniform by the end of today fills him with a sense of hope somehow.

The sound of wheels squeaking and bodies crashing brings him out into the open. It only takes two cases for him to get back into the flow.

It takes three cases before he bumps into McKay. Again. For a split second, he's thrown back to that cold afternoon when he could finally speak the word 'addict.'

"Dude," she says, walking the opposite direction. "Watch where you're walking."

Langdon stares back at her with an opened mouth. His jaw is slack with surprise. "Uhhm."

McKay stops in her tracks and looks back at him. Gets a genuine observation of him. She turns back around and knocks her arm against his.

"I'm kidding, man."

His breath leaves him, top lip quivering on an exhale. A corner of his lip tips up as McKay grins back at him.

"Welcome back. Meet afterwards or will you be busy?" McKay asks.

"No." Langdon sees on her face how it sounds. "No, I mean, yes. Yes. That would be great. See you later?"

McKay looks dubious, raised eyebrows, but she's still smiling. She waves him off, and Javadi, who he hadn't even seen, smiles tight-lipped at him and follows in her steps, nearly prancing on the tips of her toes.

He sighs, and it's a shaky, barely-there exhale. Nothing is normal anymore, and Langdon's whole world tilts.

It takes a shocking seven cases before he runs into Robby.

There's a gurney coming in through the back entrance. It's instinct,

like magnets pulling together, for Langdon to direct all his focus on the patient and run to the gurney's side. His feet fall in motion beside an EMT he vaguely remembers the name of.

"What do we got?"

Langdon doesn't remember his voice sounding so deep, like a far away echo. He looks up and sees the split second Robby realizes he is standing on the other side of the same gurney. Robby looks down, away, anywhere that isn't Langdon.

"Lula Barcley," the EMT says without pause. "55 years old, fell from the stairs in her home. Daughter found her unconscious. Possible concussion."

The patient stares up at them, possibly through them. Her eyes are crystal clear, but her gaze is cold. Gazed over. Langdon gulps, stares up at Robby instead.

"How long?" Robby asks, moving with the gurney.

"Daughter says it couldn't have been more than five minutes."

One of the EMTs steps on Langdon's foot. Pushes him to keep walking into the trauma room. A strap keeps the patient's head straight on the gurney, but her eyes roll over to him. Unintentional. Langdon can't start the cogs in his brain fast enough to understand the importance of that.

The EMTs leave the room and a flood of nurses replace them. Except, it's still just him and Robby trapped here.

Langdon doesn't remember how many days he's been sober. Just how many days it's been since he's seen Robby.

Nine months.

Twenty-nine days.

Eleven hours.

And some amount of minutes. Forgive him for not remembering, but it's better than the amount of effort that Robby's given to him. Which is nothing. Seems to be prioritizing all his efforts into *ignoring* him, actually.

A hoard of nurses swarm the room. They start shouting out numbers

that Langdon can't focus on.

"Doctor Langdon."

The voice is angry, nearly a growl for attention. He spikes his head up and sees Robby glaring at him, hands clenched around his biceps in that 'I'm waiting' way.

"What are you thinking?"

His immediate thought is fury.

He's thinking about how fucking infuriating it is to be back here, to have jumped through every hoop that Robby has demanded of him, like a good little hound, just to be ignored like some nobody. Like he wasn't Robby's *best*.

Langdon reaches for that outrage. Transforms it into passion. Fuel to get the cogs turning, because he will *not* be made a fucking fool.

He didn't spend ten months going through recovery just to fumble.

"Most likely concussion. Depending on how she fell, we have to consider intracranial hemorrhage."

Robby lowers his head. A nurse rushes behind him, but it's all a blur. Everything around them spins like a shaken snow globe.

"How do we rule that out?"

"CT or MRI. BP's high. Could be a sign."

The attention is dizzying. He feels Robby's gaze as he moves around, checking the patient's pupil response.

"So, how do we fix this?"

"Medication to lower her BP. If there's a big enough bleed, we'll have to call surgery."

Langdon looks up at Robby, narrowing his eyes and *daring* him to say anything. Even if it's to tell him that his plan of action is wrong—which he knows he isn't.

He wonders if the desperation is obvious on his face. Robby clears his throat, eyes glaring at the ground, like Robby doesn't *want* to give Langdon the win. Doesn't want to see him succeed in his ER.

Robby must know, on some level subconsciously or not, what it did to him to hear his praises. Used to be so easy with his approval, like a second language he can slip in and out of, because they both understand that he's the best resident around.

Or at least, was the best resident. Now, Robby's so reserved and pissed off that Langdon's starting to waver in his own confidence.

Still, with a pounding heart, he clings onto his last string of self-assurance which keeps him running. They're waiting for the other one to break, and he's not going to let Robby's fickle faith in him be his downfall.

Damn Robby.

The doors swooshing open breaks his thoughts. Doctor Garcia walks in, a sickening smile plastered on her face. Her eyebrows raise at the sight of Langdon.

"Looks like my vacation is over."

"Miss me that much?" Langdon replies, feeling himself slip into the banter.

She scoffs. "Not at all. What do we got?"

Langdon gives her a confused look. "Who called *you?* I've got this handled."

"First day jitters? Surgery gets even days, remember? Go look clueless somewhere else."

Langdon laughs, and it's the first time he's felt normal all day. When he looks back up, Robby's disappeared, and his heart breaks at the fact that he's not surprised at all.

He doesn't trust anything that may come out of his mouth, so he sits with McKay on her plush couch for twenty minutes without saying a word.

She's watching some new drama series that has the corniest writing Langdon has ever heard. There's still tears in McKay's eyes no matter how many times Langdon scoffs at each impossible scenario that happens in the show.

"He hates me, Cassie."

McKay looks over, tissue dabbing at the corner of her eyes. “What happened today?”

He recounts the singular case they worked together. How every time a doctor was required, Robby would dance around the new attending and conveniently remove himself from Langdon’s sight.

“You’re like a puppy, man.”

Langdon glares at her. It stings, but it’s true. Just like every other revelation he’s had over the past nine months.

He’s apparently really bad at being self-aware. McKay seems to have some insight on his character, because she keeps going.

“No, seriously. You keep chasing him around, but you have to focus on yourself. Can’t be worried about Robby when he’s clearly got his own shit going on.”

“I guess,” Langdon says. He pulls his feet onto the couch, knocking his chin on his knees. “What do I do, Cassie? I…I’m really not sure. I’m not good at this stuff.”

“What stuff?”

He waves a hand, hoping McKay can read the air. She raises an eyebrow at him, nodding along for him to verbalize his thoughts, but he can’t. He doesn’t want to say it. Whatever…feelings he has regarding Robby.

“What do you think you should do?”

Langdon rolls his eyes. “You sound like my therapist.”

“Yeah? How do you think I learned to get through this? Just play along.”

He thinks it over. Tries to place himself in Robby’s shoes, but he’s too far away. Every step Langdon takes, Robby takes ten more. He’s at the top of the stairs that Langdon can’t even climb.

“I don’t know. Should I talk to him?”

McKay shakes her head. “You need to give him some space. And time. Give him that much, and see where it goes. It’s only the first day.”

“Yeah. Yeah, alright. I’ll see how the week goes.”

McKay gives him a look like he suggested a spectacularly idiotic idea. “The week?”

“No good?”

“Frank,” McKay says. Her eyes narrow like she’s about to start crying at her show again, but she’s looking at him. “Robby’s going on sabbatical for three months.”

Langdon’s vision swims. He can’t tell if he’s about to pass out or start throwing shit.

McKay puts a warm hand on his back, right above the muscle that started it all. The knot in his throat dissolves his words into bile, and he’s right back in the ambulance bay all those months ago.

Chapter 3

Langdon tries taking McKay's advice and focuses all his energy towards himself.

Therapy's a good start, and he still attends his weekly sessions. Alanna is unsubtle in her attempts to coax stories about Robby out of him. It may be due to the fact he name-drops Robby a few minutes before his sessions end and leaves as soon as Alanna tries to dig deeper.

His NA meetings have been helping too. It's at least somewhat reassuring to know that he isn't the only one with these bizarre thoughts. He meets with his sponsor after every meeting at the local diner.

Gregory suggests that he should focus on himself and his relationships outside of Robby. His plate is full enough with adapting to full time work again. Being drug tested and attending meetings and staying in line with his strict contract that allows him to work in the first place.

Dealing with his…*feelings* about Robby is a whole separate plate he doesn't want to touch.

"You can deal with your relationship once your partner's back to actually talkin' to you," Gregory says from across the diner counter.

Langdon shakes his head. He digs into his breakfast sausage patties. They're way too greasy, but he sort of feels like he's earned this for dragging himself out of bed and attending NA this morning.

"Abby doesn't want anything to do with me. I'm only ever hearing about her from her lawyer."

Gregory raises an eyebrow at him. His drink sits paused on his bottom lip before he lowers the cup. "Who the hell's Abby?"

"My ex-wife? Keep with the program, man."

A colossal laugh echoes in the diner. Gregory's face shifts from a grin to straight faced in a blink of an eye. "Never heard of her."

"Dude, how do you not know who my—you know what. Never mind. Who did you think I was seeing?"

The silence is filled with Gregory taking a lousy slurp from his coffee. “Thought that Robby guy was your boyfriend or something.”

The breakfast sinks to the bottom of his stomach. His fork clatters against the plate. He’s…not hearing this right.

“You thought Robby and I….”

He can’t even fucking say it. If he vocalizes it, Langdon’s mind is gonna flood with all sorts of thoughts he’s definitely not going to handle well.

“I’m—uhh…not gay.”

Gregory gives him a look over his cup that Langdon doesn’t understand. Isn’t gonna give the energy to decipher it either, so he focuses on his plate. His scrambled eggs stare back at him, and he pushes the plate away.

“Take off your ring, man. You look pathetic with that thing on.”

His eyes jut over to his engagement ring. He’s been slipping it on each morning like an old routine.

At first, it was a disguise meant to hide the fact that anything was wrong. That he still had a wife who loved him for all his flaws and nothing bad ever happened and he was a perfectly sane man attuned to society.

Now, when he slips the ring on, it's out of routine. And maybe some delusional hope that it would channel some confidence into him. If he wore the right outfit, he could teleport back in time to when he still had everything under control.

Back before the addiction and drugs and Robby to when he was just himself. A confident, snarky doctor with a good head on his shoulders.

After a moment, he twists the ring off and pockets it.

Langdon knocks on McKay’s door afterwards. He’s lucky that it’s her day off, or else she was going to be pissed at him for blowing up her phone, because he was *going* to talk to her about this one way or another.

She swings the door open, one pajama leg riding up more than the

other. Rubs a hand through her disheveled hair as she lets him in.

"Did you just wake up?" Langdon asks.

"Shoes off," she grumbles.

He pushes his shoes off with each heel and trails her into the living space. The curtains are drawn shut, so Langdon reels them open to help bring light into the room. McKay flops onto the couch, arm slapped over her eyes.

"Dude, what the hell?" McKay groans.

"You'll feel better. Little something called Vitamin D."

"I'll feel better once you make me something to eat."

Langdon narrows his eyes, still standing awkwardly in the doorway of her living room. "Why do *I* have to make *you* something?"

His grumblings go unanswered, and he makes his way into the kitchen. For someone of such great intelligence and capabilities, Langdon's learned that McKay *sucks* at cooking. Nearly poisonous levels of terrible.

He's not that great either. Abby used to do all of the cooking as a stay-at-home mother, but now that *that* relationship has ended, he's on his own.

For the future, he should know how to cook for the kids…if he gets to see them. Maybe not be the douchebag, out-of-touch father who isn't buying his kids flavorless microwave dinners every night.

There's no medical skill that he doesn't have locked down. He's a senior resident in a emergency department of a very frantic, bustling city. Cooking should be a piece of cake compared to his line of work.

"You're really not getting any better," McKay judges twenty minutes later, mouth full of food.

"You're more than welcome to make your own breakfast."

Langdon takes a bite of the pancakes. There's a tough rubbery texture followed by a strange after taste. If he pours enough syrup, he can ignore the dryness.

"So, what did you come here to tell me about?"

“Who said I’m here for anything?”

McKay scrapes more syrup onto her pancake. “So, you came over just to make me a shitty breakfast?”

“My sponsor thinks I’m gay.”

McKay cackles. She looks up, and sees the very serious look he’s giving her, because this is a very grave issue, *damnit.* “Oh, you’re serious.”

“Yeah.”

“Why would he think that?”

“I don’t know!”

McKay glares at him. “Okay, I need you to walk me through this.”

So, Langdon does just that. By the end of the story, his heart has started racing and McKay is looking at him like he’s an idiot. Which, he may just be, because,

“Am I an idiot?”

“Nah.”

“Cass, I’m talking about Robby more than my *ex-wife.* The mother of my kids!”

Langdon groans. In the corner of his eye as McKay drops her head into a palm. She’s not even trying to hide her grin.

“What’s the harm in a little crush?”

It’s not a *crush.*

And he voices as much, because he’s a grown man. Crushes aren't something he’s experienced past the age of seventeen. The whole idea is juvenile. And tasteless.

Robby is his mentor. His friend. They’ve been through an insurmountable of shit together—even before that shift from hell.

Langdon’s the man he is today, because of Robby’s influence. He’s soaked in every lesson, every teaching, every praise and redirection, every ‘good work,’ every ‘just like that—’

A strong heat rises in his cheeks. Langdon stares at the table. His breath is loud in his ears, and he must look like an idiot to McKay.

If *'crush'* isn't too off the mark, then *'little'* may just be the biggest understatement of the century.

"Am I gay?" Langdon mutters.

"Well, that's kind of up to you."

"I'm not…I like women."

"Okay, *now* you're being an idiot."

Langdon isn't familiar with this kind of thing. At all. He thought this was something people figured out during their freshman year of college, that first time away from home, not after one divorce and a thirty-third birthday.

A bright light batters his eyes. McKay's phone is shoved in his face. After his eyes adjust to the abnormal brightness of her screen, he sees a staff picture from a conference happening in town.

He remembers being a fresh-faced intern, stuffing himself in an oversized tuxedo, and being locked into a massive hotel room with no clue what was happening.

He was much more comfortable socializing with people he has connected with beyond more than just *'hand me that scalpel.'* It transformed into more of a networking event for him than a collection of talks and workshops to learn from. A chance to showcase his charm and wits.

Before he could work up the courage to speak with some of the department figures he recognized, Robby had popped into his vision and grabbed him by the shoulder. A heavy palm kneaded just below his neck.

His face was flushed, a rosy tint to his high cheekbones. He had the demeanor of a drunk man, but Langdon knew even then that Robby wasn't much of a drinker. Just an extremely low tolerance for someone of his stature.

Langdon feels a breathy chuckle slip from his mouth in real time. The man *is* huge—the muscles of his back wide and strong—and his mind's eye travels down Robby's arms. Thick and surprisingly toned. It's a

shame he hides it all underneath those zip-up jackets.

He blinks, ashamed at his thoughts. Robby from the picture zones back into vision. His rare, polite smile points to the flush on his face that trickles down and under the collar of his button up shirt.

That night, Robby had maneuvered him around the room, showcasing him off as their newest and brightest intern. Introduced him to the other attendings with the Pitt and other emergency medicine experts at the conference. By the end of the night, Robby's hands had dug a permanent dent in his shoulders.

Langdon should have known from that moment he would have been stuck chasing that same level of recognition and adoration from Robby.

"Wow," McKay says after a while. He forgot she was there. "You're down *bad.*"

"He's my mentor," Langdon argues. "And my boss."

"Oh, like that's stopped anyone before."

"*You*?"

McKay guffaws, swinging a hand through the air. "God, no. Collins."

"That rumor was true!?"

She leans forward, head propped on her palm. Langdon watches, jaw dropped, as McKay takes the phone back and swipes before shoving the phone back in his face.

It's a different photo from the same night, some irrelevant higher board members cheering together in the foreground.

The more important part of the picture is in the background. Collins is tucked in the corner, a stunning navy turtle neck tucked into black slacks. As professional as ever.

What wasn't professional in the picture is Robby. He's not exactly towering over her, but he's close enough to nearly hide her from sight. His head's tilted down, and he's smiling gently at whatever she's got to say.

Collins had several rotations as a med student with different departments at PTMC. She graduated to then be accepted into the Pitt

for her residency. Langdon didn't join the Pitt crew until the first year of his residency. She had several more months of experience with Robby, despite being the same year.

Their odd closeness during his formative years start to make a little more sense.

"Where did you get these?" Langdon whispers, mouth dry.

"They got sent in a group chat a while ago. Cute, right?"

"So…Collins and Robby."

McKay's grin is not helping him feel any better about whatever epiphany he's discovering. She shuts off her phone.

"I don't know for sure, but I heard from one of the night nurses that they had fooled around a bit."

"Had?"

"Yes, Frank, *had.* He's all yours for the taking."

Reality comes shattering down on his shoulders like glass. That photo was a nice trip down nostalgia road, but McKay's words have effectively yanked him back to the present where Robby can't even look at him without being disgusted by what he sees.

"No—that's…." Langdon sighs, a soft, barely-there exhale. "Robby wants nothing to do with me."

McKay's eyes crinkle. A sad wince.

Great.

Langdon's first gay crush is his emotionally unavailable boss twice his age.

Fuck his stupid life.

When an emotional, personal challenge comes his way, Langdon tends to avoid it. Turning his cheek the other way and burying his head in work or projects that will cover up the problem.

So, when Langdon realizes he may have some really serious feelings for Robby, he does what he does best:

Ignore it.

Except, he can't get his mind out of an obsessive cycle of being reminded of Robby, derailing his thoughts into ideas about Robby's doing, swearing to not think about Robby for the rest of the day, only to come back to the beginning when someone or something reminds him of Robby once again.

Robby, Robby, *Robby.*

Clearly, shoving the problems he and Abby were having under a pile of work had done wonders. He's divorced now and can't see or talk to his kids without third party involvement. So, maybe, it's time to switch gears.

He picks back up on Alanna's advice of reconnecting with people in his old circle. Three months without Robby at work gives him the perfect opportunity, and it's probably a healthier option than what Langdon would have done if he had this disturbing revelation months ago.

McKay's insight on the Pitt's gossip is telling him that most people haven't found out why Langdon was gone for ten months. He's only sure about the fact that there are speculations about his disappearance. From a parental death or an onset of a chronic disease of some sorts—he's heard it all.

Mel is the first person at work to treat him like a normal coworker.

She's always been a companion to him. A kind soul that somehow crept past his walls. On her first *goddamn day.* He can't understand what's so magical about her, but he's always at ease when she's around.

He finds her at one of the computers. She's leaned in close, teeth fidgeting with her bottom lip as she reads over a report. It takes her a few moments to realize he's standing there, but when she looks up, her eyes are wide.

"Oh—hi, Doctor Langdon."

"Hey, Mel."

"I never got the chance to welcome you back." She turns in the chair, smile bright. "So, welcome back."

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

“Really?”

Langdon feels himself mirror her smile. “Yeah, it does. And I wanted to apologize for leaving so suddenly.”

Mel’s face drops, like the reminder of his departure taste sour on her tongue. “I don’t know why, but I’m sure it was for a good reason. I’m just happy that you’re back. We all are.”

His throat clamps around the words that Langdon doesn’t have the resolve to speak. He knows what he wants to say though. Can even acknowledge now the pride and joy that he feels at someone telling him he *belongs* here.

Even if the acceptance isn’t coming from Robby, it’s still nice to hear.

Javadi’s a more familiar face ever since he and McKay became closer. In the past, he would have said she trails McKay like a lost puppy. He still chuckles at his first memory of her collapsing on the floor at seven in the morning.

That clumsy, queasy girl isn’t who he sees now. *Now,* he sees a confident student ready to make it big in the medical field.

Once she figures out what field she wants to specialize in, that is.

She’s more blunt around him now that Langdon’s the one trailing McKay around. Not harsh, just looser with her filter.

Or maybe it’s just the combination of Langdon’s pessimism and McKay’s foul mouth transforming Javadi into a mischievous gossip fiend.

Javadi and him stare at the betting pool together. The white board is plastered with colorful sticky notes, names and dollars scribbled on each.

“See, if your bet’s right, then that means you get a percentage of the winning pot. The more you bet, the more you win.”

“But…that’s only if you’re right.”

“Well, yeah. That’s how betting works.”

Some idiot stole a car from a dealership, abandoned it on the side of

the road, and is currently running through the highway. They're betting on the condition of their soon-to-be patient. He's certainly within their catchment zone.

Langdon writes *'drug-induced mania, $20'* on the sticky note and tapes it to the board. Javadi trades places with him to stick her own note to the board. He scoffs when he sees her answer.

"Delirium caused by infection?" Langdon reads, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Is there something wrong with my answer?"

"No, just don't be upset when I take all your money."

Javadi shrugs, and before she has any time to respond, their next patient comes rushing in through the back doors.

Langdon eats his words five hours later when the forty-two year old erratic driver gets diagnosed sepsis-induced delirium.

Alanna keeps asking for updates about work. She's too nosey for his liking, but he still finds himself confiding in her anyways.

"It's weird."

"What is?" She asks.

"Seeing people move on with life like nothing happened."

Collins graduated from her residency, so she's now an attending with PTMC. Which—good. She's always been one of the smarter people there.

When he had shown his face during that first week back, she had given him a rather surprised look. Then, she welcomed him back and gave a friendly push to his shoulders. Said he looked healthier in that honest way that no one else has really acknowledged him with.

It would have stung if she wasn't there during his return. They've been through too much shit together to not be bonded, and he's really fucking glad his disappearance didn't change a thing.

Mohan's technically his equal now too, promoted to senior resident. She's quicker on her feet than he recalls, but he wonders if it's just her newfound belief in herself that makes her appear faster. The new attending Al-Hashimi instills more praise and confidence in Mohan

than Robby ever believed in doing.

Langdon knows for a fact that he himself has slowed down, so maybe everyone around him just looks to be speeding up. Everyone's moved up in their training besides him. He's stuck repeating his last year like some super senior in high school.

She keeps repeating how everything takes *time,* like how Robby needs *time,* and Langdon should give himself *time* too.

"You keep mentioning Robby."

He bristles. An innate urge to fight back builds in the back of his head like a forgotten memory coming forward.

"Yeah?"

"Is there something specific you want to talk about regarding him?"

Langdon thinks back on that conference picture. His rosy cheeks and how his large arm was so casually hung around Langdon's shoulder, showing him off like his latest trophy. Always a beam of support.

Except for when he needed him the most.

"No, it's fine."

Little by little, as the weeks pass, Langdon eases into a normality that he hasn't felt in almost a year. It creeps on him slowly when he nods good morning to Whittaker or fights with Princess over the donut flavors a generous patient brought in.

There's still a hollow. Like a hole in a leaky faucet, building up enough water to plop out one teensy droplet. As much as he appreciates his newfound—and oldfound, if that's a word—connections, it only makes Robby's absence more prominent.

Maybe he should consider this a genuine obsession. Trading pills for men. Or rather, one man in particular.

Late at night, when his sleep issues still keep him up, memories from the past plague him. This ideation of Robby, he realizes, goes back much farther than he likes to think.

He tries not to let the one-sided nature of their relationship trouble him. Tries to play it off as a random school hall crush on a girl way

out of his league.

Every time a reminder of Robby pops up, Langdon physically shakes himself. Psyching himself up like he's about to take off on a track. He's gotten odd looks from his peers, but that's nothing new.

It's a mistake to do as much in front of Dana. He jumps in place, bouncing on the tips of his toes, and Dana scoffs at him.

"So, you're back for good," Dana comments in a light tone that suggests it's anything but casual.

Langdon shoots his head down from the patient board. She's leaning on the other side. The thin glasses are propped far down the bridge of her nose as she reads someone.

"That alright?"

"So long as you stop being a pain in my ass."

It's meant as a joke. Langdon still feels sick, guilt twisting his intestines in strange knots.

"Dana, I never got the chance to apologize."

The rush of the ER swarms over his words. His shame keeps him from shouting the words he knows he needs to say.

It was much easier before to holler the shit that would hurt the most. Lashing out was an easy habit to fall back on. He finds it harder now to say the kinder sentiments.

"Do you have a minute?" Langdon asks, teetering on his heels.

"Of course not," she says.

Turning her back, Dana makes her way down the hall. He follows her, maybe to convince her, but she takes them to the empty break room.

Right where they were all those months ago.

He leans against the closed door, peering down at his feet. His gaze lingers on the ground before he looks back up.

"I'm sorry for how I treated you that day. There's no excuse for what I did."

Dana stares at him, arms crossed. She raises a hand, motioning for him to continue.

“Robby found out about…something bad that I did. I lashed out and used you as a last resort. I had some ridiculous idea that someone would…I don’t know. Save me, I guess.”

Langdon peeks up at her. Her eyebrows are still raised, but she doesn’t look shocked. He doesn’t remember much of the smaller details from that day. Only remembers the disgusting desperation seeping out of him, clinging to Dana like she’d pull him out of there.

She was always great at roping in the ones who slipped through the crack. He thought she’d do the same for him.

“He caught you stealing from the PDS.”

It isn’t a question, but Langdon nods. His ears roar with heat.

It’s been a while since he’s been nauseous from this particular combination of guilt and humiliation. Suddenly, he’s back in Robby’s Jeep and at the start of his withdrawals.

His hand slaps over his mouth. A strange sound like a stuttering exhale breaks past his fingers. The breathing exercises Alanna taught him have slipped his mind entirely like it was never there to begin with.

“You clean now?”

“Almost a year sober,” Langdon mutters, trying his best at a smile and failing. “Dana, I’m really sorry. You shouldn’t have had to deal with that. I shouldn't have forced that on you.”

Dana stares at him like a grade school teacher who had caught him slacking off in class. Trying to decide a punishment befitting the crime. She steps forward, clapping a hand around his arm.

“You put in the work, kid. There’s no way in hell the old Langdon would have apologized. I appreciate that.”

His eyes grow watery, but he blinks large and slow to control himself. He will not get emotional now, *damnit!*

“Thank you, Dana. Really….”

She nods, eyes narrowing. “Have you talked to Robby yet?”

Langdon shakes his head, breathing a laugh. “Robby wants nothing to do with me.”

“You told him what you just told me?”

“I haven’t had the chance. He avoided me like the plague and then dropped off the face of the earth.”

“Tell him what you just told me. Might do you both some good.”

She’s not sure what she means by the *‘both’* of them, but by the time he thinks to ask, Dana’s slipped out the door. He lets the hammering in his heart slow down for at least a minute before he goes back out there.

With Al-Hashimi and Collins as the day attendings in charge for the time being, Langdon has been adjusting his view of Robby in his mind.

Robby is no longer his boss. He’s not on a pedestal bestowing wisdom to his inferiors. Right now, he’s nothing to the ED. He’s just one man.

The thought churns some heavy thoughts in his mind. It hits stronger when Langdon’s at home, sitting idle and bored. He thinks about what Robby likes to do when he’s at home. What he does in his spare time, who he talks to, if he likes to go out or stay indoors.

It forces Langdon to realize that he had a distorted view of Robby. Up until that night in the ambulance bay, he was always quick to praise Robby’s ways. Saw him as a strong leader with a tight grip on his morals.

Now, he’s not quite sure who Robby is exactly. Maybe the benzos fueled the misconceptions he had. Muddled his senses and gave him rose-tinted glasses.

Robby isn’t perfect. He’s an efficient boss, an even more proficient doctor, and a genuine person who wants to help their community and is an excellent teacher to learn from.

That doesn’t mean that acknowledging his flaws will make him any less ideal.

And Langdon is horrified to realize, lying in his bed late at night, that he wants to see those bad sides of Robby. The parts that Langdon had

chastised. His own words haunt him in his downtime.

‘I wasn't the one talking to cartoon animals in Peds.’

Fuck, he was crazy for saying that to Robby.

He had to better himself. Yes, for his own progress and health, but for Robby as well. Being given a second chance means doing right by him. Doing right by everyone that he hurt.

Langdon can only hope that Robby will one day be open to accepting him. Him and these large feelings consuming him whole. Just as Langdon has started to accept Robby’s flaws.

Langdon strides along the pedestrian crossing. The October air is a mighty breeze against his neck, but he’s still in a good mood.

His lawyer had called with news about every other weekend custody with Tanner and Charlotte.

If they’re quick enough, he can spend Halloween with his children. He imagines not many fathers are actually fighting for custody of their children, so he thinks that’s why the judge is being so lenient with him.

His mind is too preoccupied with costume ideas to notice the motorcycle slamming to a stop in front of him.

The ground shakes below him as his feet stutter. Langdon glares at the cyclist before the familiarity hits him.

The cyclist’s own anger vanishes. He stares back at Langdon. His expression is minute, but he knows the small wrinkles between his eyebrows means he's in shock as well.

He knows this small detail, because it's *Robby* staring back at him from atop of the bike.

Robby wets his lip. His Adam's apple bobs before asking, “what were you thinking?”

Langdon can’t even stir up any anger at almost being hit. Not when the knowledge that Robby is back is sitting right in front of him.

He looks at the pedestrian sign. The giant white stop hand mocks Langdon. Well, guess he wasn't paying too much attention, anyway.

His shock turns defensive, and he steps closer to the motorcycle.

“I should be asking *you* that. Why are you riding a motorcycle without a helmet?”

Robby opens his mouth, and a car horn blares. They both peek over Robby’s shoulder at the pissed off Nissan driver behind them. Polite as always and patience of a saint, Robby waves a hand and pulls the motorcycle over onto the curb.

It’s only when he knocks the kickstand down that Langdon realizes this is the first time in months that they have had an actual conversation.

He doesn’t inch back when Robby unfurls from the motorcycle. Robby fixes his posture and looks up at Langdon.

Despite the three month sabbatical, he looks tired. His eyes blink slow and lazy. Langdon’s close enough to count individual lashes on his heavy eyelids.

“Robby, I need to talk to you.”

“Whatever you have to say to me can wait—”

“No, it can’t. I’m sorry.”

Robby looks back at him, eyes wide. “Is this an apology?”

“Yeah. I know I screwed up. Big time. I wish I had gone to you earlier, but I didn’t want to….”

Langdon grows shy, surrounded by the rapid passing of cars and pedestrians. The city around him flourishes in streaky blurs. Robby leans down, covering his field of view.

“Didn’t want to what?” Robby asks, a firm voice above the chaos.

“I didn’t want you to see me as a fuck up. I was so focused on being the best that burdening you with my problems was just not even in the picture.”

They stare at each other, and despite the noise of the city, it’s quiet between them. Finally, Robby nods, lips pressed together. His eyes look him up and down, and Langdon submits to the strange impulse to stay still enough for him to do so.

“Okay.”

Langdon blinks. “Okay? What do you mean?”

“I hear you.”

Robby sounds exhausted, like this is an old argument they’ve rehashed a thousand times before. Except for the fact that this isn’t old. It’s a fresh wound with the stitches still in tact, and Robby won’t *fucking* talk to him.

“Robby, please. Say something to me. You don’t even have to forgive me, man. Just stop looking at me like that.”

“I’m not looking at you in any specific way.”

“Yes, you are. You’re looking at me like you wish you never knew me.”

Robby’s grip on the handlebars grows unsure, arms falling lax to his side. His eyes wander.

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“No?” Langdon asks, pissy and fiery. “Sure felt personal every time you fetched Al-Hashimi to take over. You don’t even want to be in the same room as me, Robby!”

A quick ticking resounds from somewhere. Robby looks down at his watch before looking around. Langdon feels his patience tearing away, growing thinner and thinner with each little disgruntled noise Robby makes.

Robby sighs before commenting, “we’re going to be late.”

“That’s not really something I care about right now.”

“Really?” Robby knocks the kickstand back into the motorcycle. He pushes up, standing with the bike. “I wouldn’t expect that sort of attitude from my star resident.”

The praise knocks the wind out of Langdon. He can’t feel his body, but there’s a definite tremble to his fingers.

“Don’t—” Langdon swallows. “Don’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

Robby smiles, but it’s a weak thing. Pitiful and straining at the corners

as his eyes crinkle. His face is full of lines that tell so many stories if you know how to read them.

Langdon's just now starting to really learn.

"We can talk. *Later,*" Robby says, with emphasis after Langdon tries to flap his gums again.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'd really like that."

"Good. Now hop on." Robby nods to the empty seat behind him.

Langdon's brain freezes. He hasn't been that quick on his feet in a long time. The benzos gave him an extra layer of speed that was quite humanly impossible. He's not sure how he didn't kill himself running a hundred miles per hour into the wall.

All that to say that despite no longer being the most lethally sharp tool in the shed, he's still got a brain. However, he can't seem to understand anything Robby wants from him.

"You…want me to get on that?"

"That is usually what people mean when they say *'hop on'*."

"Robby, you only have one helmet," Langdon says, instead of vocalizing his actual thought of *'we just talked for the first time in months and I'm pretty sure you're still pissed about my almost felony charge of stealing controlled substances, but now you want me on your death trap of a vehicle?'*

"That's for you to wear. Unless you don't want to?"

"No!" Langdon says too quickly. "Just—don't drive crazy."

He grabs at the helmet. It's unnaturally gigantic in his hands. A thick, glossy shell cushioned by a plush padding on the inside. He walks forward, but the helmet on his head is a distracting weight to his balance.

Like a bobblehead, he feels his head bounce from side to side before stabilizing. Looking up, he thinks he sees Robby's smirk. Despite the teasing and humiliation, Langdon can't help the relief that floods this body at the sight.

His hands wobble in the air. He tries his best not to put any pressure on Robby as he swings his leg onto the other side of the bike. Not

unlike stepping over his children's messy pile of blocks.

Langdon leans back on the bike. Curling two hands around the passenger seat. The leather squeaks under the tension. His seat shakes to life beneath him when the key turns in the ignition.

As he tilts back, the wind brushes against the underside of his neck. It's a harsh breeze, but it cools the heat that's rising to his skin.

He could get used to this, but he also knows just how much of a horrific idea that is.

Their situation is appallingly complex, but being around Robby releases some sort of chemical in his head that tells him it's acceptable to lean back into their familiar camaraderie.

And despite the anger, frustration, disappointment, guilt, and shame, and confusion Langdon's been juggling for months, the pride at still being seen as an equal to Robby shines above everything else.

Robby turns around to face him. "It's a bumpy ride. Hold on."

"I just told you not to drive crazy. And what am I meant to hold onto? I'm not seeing an 'oh-shit' handle anywhere."

But, he does as he's told. Langdon watches his arms float in the air. His hands land on Robby's biceps. Even over the coat and surely two other layers of shirts, he can sense the toned muscle laying underneath. His mind is spinning at the thought.

"No," Robby chastises. Hears the soft voice through the clunky helmet say, "like this."

Robby grabs Langdon's right hand and brings it under his arm and on top of his chest. Brings Langdon's other arm around too so his hands are interlocked on Robby's sternum in some strange reverse CPR.

Robby tugs at his shoulder to bring him closer. The helmet dinks him in the ear, but other than that, Langdon's body is flush to Robby's back.

"Don't let go," Robby says over his shoulder. He flicks a hand forward, and the visor gets shut over his eyes, blocking out the rays of the sunrise. Even Robby is dark in the bright morning glow.

He's glad Robby decides at that moment to turn around, revving the

bike. Langdon's thoughts get lost with each mechanical groan, and he's not sure he even remembers what Robby said to him in the first place.

They make the right turn that Robby would have made if Langdon hadn't stood in the crosswalk. They're heading towards a different entrance than Langdon's used to. He tries to enjoy the breeze. Let the scenery pass by and take time to breathe in the air.

Each inhale is a new waft of Robby's cologne, and all Langdon wants to do is claw at the helmet and rip it off. This must be a new type of torture. He can't stop indulging in being completely and utterly surrounded by Robby.

His fingers clench into the bulky winter coat. Feels Robby's lungs move with each breath. It's a calm, steady pace. He eases his own breathing to match Robby's rhythm.

By the time they reach the hospital, he's nearly lulled himself to sleep.

McKay [8:21 PM]: DUDE

Langdon pulls himself up from his slouched position on the couch. He looks over at his buzzing phone.

Langdon [8:22 PM]: Hey?

The reply is almost instantaneous. Like McKay was typing at the same time as him.

McKay [8:22 PM]: saw some hunk on the back of your man's bike today…I think you need to watch out]

He feels a grin pull at his lips despite the even deeper pull he feels in his heart. The ER was busy enough to ignore this morning's run-in with Robby, but the silence of his apartment does nothing to quell those thoughts.

Langdon [8:24 PM]: Would you believe me if I told you that was me??

McKay [8:24 PM]: SHUT THE HELL UP

Langdon can't help the laugh that bursts out when he sees McKay's caller ID pop up

“Tell me everything!” She shouts.

They talk. At some point. It’s easier to slide out together after work than it is to actively plan to meet up. Plans mean commitment, and if there’s one thing he knows about Robby, is that he’s terrible with being emotionally connected enough to something to form commitment.

At least, romantically commit, and Langdon really tries not to go down that train of thought, but it’s been five days since he’s felt Robby’s heart thrumming under his palms does a lot to a person.

Specifically, a person who is starting to accept that his steadfast respect for his mentor is more than just *platonic*.

He hopes that doesn’t show on his face when they slide into the restaurant. It’s one of the cheaper ones in the area that stays open late for the hospital staff rush, but tonight, Langdon can’t recognize many of the people. Maybe it’s an intentional effort on Robby’s part to avoid anyone who may see them together.

But then again, Robby wouldn’t have brought them here in the first place if that were true.

The possibilities throb in his head, nearly inducing a headache. By the time he looks up, he realizes he’s already given his drink order to the waitress.

“Thank you, Robby.”

Robby looks up at him from the menu. His glasses are low on his nose, his pupils smaller through the distorted lens. “For what?”

He shrugs. There’s a sugar packet on the table. The corners are spiky along Langdon’s fingerpad as he plays with the paper.

“Giving me a second chance. I fucked up and shouldn’t have tried to make you….”

Make him…what. Cover up for him? Help abet his potential felony charge? Lie to the board? Continue to let Langdon steal medication and put their patients at risk?

Not that Robby had actively known he was doing any of that. Maybe he should rephrase it as ‘thank you for not letting me convince you

everything was alright.'

He winces at his own actions. Alanna keeps reassuring him that his addiction is only a small part of him. That the small doesn't define the whole. It's hard to feel that way when Robby's right in front of him.

"You didn't make me do anything," Robby says, finally. He looks back down at the menu. "I am an adult who can make his own choices."

"And you chose to give me a second chance."

"Yes."

Langon swallows. Wishes his drink, whatever he ordered, was here so that he had something to busy his jittery fingers.

"Why?"

Robby continues to read the menu like he hadn't said anything. So much for having a conversation.

It must be entertaining to Robby to force Langdon to slow down and wait. To sit in silence and replay his words in own hand. Any reassurance he was hoping for comes at Robby's pace, not the pace Langdon had tried to force them to dance to.

At least, forced *Dana.* The breakroom still brings a dizzying bout of shame.

Robby has always been particular about his words. Always choosing to strike at the right moment.

He remembers how he would take back every *'good save,'* when Langdon had fucked up. And a few patients later, when Langdon would inevitably regain Robby's good graces, would be gifted with a *'nicely done, Doctor Langdon.'*

He's been trying to pat down the thrill of receiving Robby's praise, but it hasn't been working. A part of him thinks this…transformation of respect is becoming some sort of fetish. The pit in his stomach fluttering awake every time Robby compliments him tells him as much.

"You've always been a good doctor," Robby says, unhurried. "And when you came to me about your back pain, I had ignored it."

Langdon's mouth flops open. The waitress comes back just in time to

see it. She watches for a moment before deciding to come back later. They both ignore their drinks.

“Are you….apologizing to me?”

“If you have to ask, then I’m not doing a very good job.”

“What happened to me ‘betraying you’?”

Robby pulls a hand down over his mouth, and Langdon’s eyes track the motion. He’s starting to feel insane about every little motion Robby makes. He’s only been moving in his head when he replays memories. It’s…thrilling to see him in the flesh moving with intention and vitality.

“I should have listened when you came to me. This was on me.”

The complete shift in Robby’s demeanor compared to months ago is like an earthquake to Langdon’s head. He can’t think straight through his 180 in rationale.

Langdon chews on that for a moment. His fingers suddenly no longer need something to fiddle with. There’s more preoccupying matters at hand.

“My addiction wasn’t your fault, Robby,” Langdon attests slowly.

Robby isn’t looking him in the eyes. He stoops down low to the table, leaning in. His hair falls down and drapes dangerously close to Robby’s face.

“What happened to being a grown adult responsible for their own choices?” Langdon adds.

Robby shakes his head, like his own words are ridiculous. A flood of anger courses through him.

“Seriously, Robby—”

“I should have listened. I should have known.”

They’re going in circles. The slight panic in Robby’s eyes tells him either one or both of them is about to start spiraling. Langdon slams his hands on the table and pushes back in his chair.

“Do you want me to throw you a pity party or something? You need help. I know I fucked up, but at least I’m not so naive as to think your

problems are my fault. So stop wallowing in your own self-loathing and go talk to someone about this, because it's clear to me that you still have not changed. At least *I've* owned up to my shit."

Langdon sees the accusatory finger he pointed at Robby shake in its resolve when he sees the big brown eyes staring back at him. Robby's eyes narrow, sorrowful before hardening, and his mouth's opening, and Langdon's got the sour impression that he's about to say something nasty that'll get both of them riled up.

He throws his arms down to his side and starts to walk away. Before he reaches the door, he steps back to shout, "thanks for the drink!"

A bell rings above his head as storms out of the restaurant. *Fuck* Robby and his stupid, avoidant, guarded attitude. Langdon knows he's going to regret this at the start of their next shift together, but right now, scrambling out the door, it feels pretty damn good.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Trick or treat!”

Frank feels his lip twitch in a smile. “Charlotte, baby, we haven’t started yet.”

McKay bends down to her level, plopping a candy bar into her bag. “And who are you supposed to be?”

“I’m a fairy!” Charlotte spins around, showing off her tulle skirt and wings. Langdon doesn’t know anything about makeup, so he’s glad that Abby had taken over that department.

“Your new place is nice,” Abby had commented. The kids were in their room getting ready for the night. It was strange to see her standing in his new apartment. Like seeing an old teacher outside of school.

Langdon looks at her from the other side of the counter. “You’ve been here before.”

“I know. I just don’t think I’ve said it yet.”

She’d been almost amicable with him for a few weeks. It wasn’t noticeable until the day she walked the kids to his car instead of waiting in her doorway. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, so he tried not to think about it at all.

“Well—uhh. Thanks.”

Abby smiled, hesitant and lips pressed together. “Have you been doing alright?”

“Are we doing small talk now?” Langdon asked. He sighs, circling the counter. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s gotten better.”

“That’s good. I’m—Frank. I’m really proud of you. And I’m glad you’re here for them.”

“They’re the world to me, Abby.”

“I know.” They were quiet for a long while. It was probably only a few seconds, but the awkward tension stretched his perception of time. Eventually, Abby faced him, face serious. “Listen, I was wondering if you weren’t busy, we could….”

“Could what?”

“Grab a coffee?”

McKay slaps a hand over her mouth. They’re walking side by side behind their kids. “And then?”

Langdon shrugs. “Charlotte came out of her room, and the topic was dropped.”

She laughs, loud over the cacophony of children running through the street. “Oh, man. Abby wants you *bad.*”

He sighs as they stop next to a mailbox. “Go on,” he urges Tanner.

His kids hold hands and look up at Harrison.

Langdon thought Harrison would have the idea that spending his Halloween with a bunch of preschoolers was a waste of a good holiday. Instead he’s embraced Langdon’s kids and all their oddities. It warms something in him to watch them hobble up to the door together.

Once the kids are a safe distance away, Langdon resumes his train of thought. “I don’t know if she meant to come off that way.”

“So, you know how to flirt with women but can’t recognize when a woman is flirting with you?”

He watches Charlotte pluck a fingernail in her mouth as the homeowner presents her with a feast of sweet options.

“I spent a really long time believing she wanted nothing to do with me, I started to think that was reality.”

McKay hums. Nods along as she stares at the ground. She rocks on her heels, and Langdon rolls his eyes.

It’s almost too easy to predict her sometimes, but he’s also pretty sure that half of the time, she’s baiting him.

Unfortunately, it works half the time too.

“What now?”

“Hmm?” She juts her head up. “Nothing, just sounds an awful lot like how you talk about Robby.”

“Oh, I hadn’t noticed. Thank you so much for pointing that out.”

McKay’s skeevy grin softens when the kids show off their first treat of the night. “Wow! Come on, we’ve got a lot more houses to hit tonight.”

As they watch the kids from the sidewalk, Langdon spills about what happened in the restaurant. She’s quiet, stunned silent until he’s all the way to the part where he ran out the door.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone stand up to Robby like that.”

“Well, someone had to do it,” Langdon mutters.

“I’m proud of you,” she says, knocking their shoulders together as they walk to the next house. The evening grows brisk, and she's a line of solid heart beside him. “Even when Robby decides to kill you after your next shift together.”

“Have I ever told you your faith in my relationship with Robby moves me?”

“Nope!”

Langdon slumps in the chair opposite of Alanna. There’s a tiny fountain that sits on her desk. The sound of water recycling over and over tickles his ears.

“Everyone keeps telling me to give him more time, more space, and I am, but it doesn’t seem to be working.”

“What doesn’t seem to be working?”

“This whole ‘he’ll come around’ thing.”

“It’s not an exact science,” she says with a smirk.

He appreciates her, because she’s not like the stereotype of a therapist he had in his head. Motivational posters plastered on the wall patronizing him as she nods with her thin glasses, asking ‘and how does that make you feel?’

She has moments of sarcasm that match his own pessimistic humor. It's appreciated, but right now, he really just wants a straight answer.

"Has he been working through his feelings about you? Do you know?"

Langdon chuckles a single, disbelieving laugh. "Robby bought a motorcycle after I got checked into rehab, and then went on a three month sabbatical the day I was coming back just to avoid me. What does that sound like to you?"

Alanna never looks surprised. She doesn't raise an eyebrow, instead simply saying, "sounds to me that he would rather avoid you than address his thoughts about you.

Langdon throws his hands up in a *'thank you,'* motion. *Finally,* someone gets it.

"That doesn't mean time and space won't help."

He sits back in his seat with a groan. So much for that. Alanna chuckles.

"You can't force someone to talk about something they're not ready to face yet. That defeats the point of healing. Especially someone from an older generation who may not have had figures in their life to let them express themselves in a healthy way."

Langdon cups his cheek as he props an elbow on the armrest. "You got a time machine, then?"

"No, but I do have some advice. Focus on your own recovery. You can't be a healer for both you and Robby. Remember, you just got back to your job. I know your brain moves at a faster pace than most others, but not everyone's at the same speed."

He sighs. There's not a single rebuttal he can throw at her. Not only because she's right, but because she'll call bullshit and throw it right back at him.

Accepting things he can't change has never been his specialty. He's a doctor, *damnit.* That's his whole schtick. Someone comes in with a broken bone or a road burn, and he waves his healing hands to fix it.

Turns out there are even some ailments he can't fix. Not as a doctor nor a son nor a father. It's not about him anymore.

The amount of shit he's dealt with today would clog every toilet in the hospital.

He's subjected to yet another random drug test. His contract stipulates this, so it's not a surprise to him. Just another reminder that in the eyes of some people he's not good enough yet.

Even if he's finally been able to forgive himself.

Not only that, but two patients crash in front of him, basically dead on arrival. He performs CPR on another patient for a solid five minutes before Perlah runs in with the DNR form. The compressions spike a pain in his back he hasn't felt in weeks, and he tries to hide his awkward gait for the rest of his shift.

Worst of all, his mood takes a sour turn. He can't figure out why. It plummets sometime between the DNR form and watching Robby manhandle the hell out of Whittaker.

All of Robby's behaviors start to stick out like a sore thumb. Like someone took a hammer to Langdon's hand and slammed it. Now Langdon can't look away from the throbbing redness of the injury. Fascinated by how *wrong* everything is going.

It's praising Mel for her stellar job. A nod of approval to Javadi. Giving encouragement to the new med students that he has confidence in them.

It makes sense why he does it. He's the attending. On a deeper level, Langdon knows that he always treats the people furthest from him the best.

Everyone who gets too close gets burned.

When Langdon goes back into a central room to check up on an unconscious patient, running into Santos is his sign that the universe if truly fucking with him.

But it's what the universe decides to gift him.

Santos is the last person Langdon has been procrastinating an apology for. He remembers her first day clearly and how they had riled each other up. Hissing and showing off to Robby just how incompetent the other person was.

Well, Langdon mostly blames that horrific shift on Santos' strong

personality and poor decision-making clashing with the peak of Langdon's addiction. It's an ugly sight in his memory and a reminder of his own failings. How *childish* he was during that time.

Even if Santos put patients at risk with her rash decisions, so did he. They're basically reflections of each other, and he despised her for that. Was furious with Santos and what he saw in her.

"Santos."

Her shoulders jump and she whips her head around. She looks up from the tablet in her arms.

"Uhhm. Yes?"

"You got a minute?"

He can see the cogs in her brain turning. She's deciding whether to lie and flee out the door or let her curiosity get the better of her. He knows this, because he would have done the same thing in her position.

"Is something the matter?" She asks, voice tight. Her entire posture is tense, shoulders rolling back in an attempt to appear aloof.

"Yeah, I wanted to say that…." The words don't sound right on his tongue. He winces, trying again. "I've been meaning to tell you—"

Out of the corner of his eye and through the doorway, he sees Robby at the nurse's station watching them like a hawk. It urges some kind of preyish instinct in him to fight or flight.

"Look. I'm sorry."

Santos stares at him. She almost looks like she wants to punch him. "What?"

"For treating you like shit on your first day.

Her mouth moves but nothing actually comes out. After a while, she cocks her head. "Yeah, that did suck."

"I'm not apologizing to get something in return or telling you to pretend like it didn't happen. Just have been meaning to…let you know. It was wrong of me."

Langdon looks up to see Santos gaping at him. Like his words put a

spell on her.

He almost thanks her, because she *was* the catalyst that forced his hand into getting help, but he's not ready to be that vulnerable in front of her, and he's almost twice as sure that she wouldn't believe a word he says.

"You don't have to say anything—"

"Okay." Santos puts her hands up, face twisting and scrunching. "You're really unnerving when you're being sincere."

"Want me to be an asshole again?"

"Actually, I'd rather just stop talking all together."

Langdon scoffs, feeling his lips twitch in something resembling a smile. "The feeling is mutual."

"Well, good."

They stare at each other for a moment. Langdon nods before looking around. Robby's disappeared, but he's sure he's going to be ruminating about their conversation the rest of the shift. He rolls his eyes, and looks back at Santos who is rocking on her feet.

"I'm just gonna." Santos trails off, pointing behind Langdon.

"Yeah, I'm going this way, so…."

They step in the same direction, feet fumbling. After a few seconds of twisting and dodging each other, they walk in the opposite directions.

Langdon realizes that he's just entered the back hallway just to avoid walking out the same door as Santos. He laughs to himself and circles the hallway back to the nurse's station.

"Doctor Langdon."

He pokes his head out from his locker. Robby's standing on the other side of the door.

Despite acknowledging his very real and…intimate feelings for Robby, he can't overcome the fucked up deja vu he's having. Panic strikes his heart, igniting old memories he really hates thinking about.

No matter how magnetizing Robby's eyes are to look at.

He can't fight down the same old paranoia. It was easy to do as much in rehab, and even during outpatient, with Robby miles away and out of sight. But now, there's just a locker between them and light years of distrust.

Is Robby questioning his sobriety? Have they finally reached the point where he can't stand him? Is he going to demand to search his locker again?

"Got a second?"

He swallows. There's absolutely no reason for his nervous system to be setting off all the alarms like this. Unfortunate for him that his body reacts to standing in this hallway the same way it would being held at gun point.

"What is it?"

"You apologized to Doctor Santos?"

Langdon almost rolls his eyes before he remembers where he is. "The rumor mill has gotten a lot faster than I remember."

"I haven't heard anything. It was just a question."

They stare at each other, except tonight, Langdon's not in the mood to keep this up. If this were before, he would have honed his eyes on Robby for the entire night. Would even use eyedrops just to avoid blinking and missing a millisecond of Robby's attention.

He turns back to his locker and grabs his bag. It's been a long fucking day, and all he wants to do is go home and watch the game.

"Since we're in the mood for contrition, I wanted to apologize as well."

Langdon hooks his bag back in his locker. Now *this* is something he could get behind staying late for.

"Yeah?" He asks.

"You were right. Arguing about the semantics of what happened undermines your recovery."

Robby's trying real hard to look Langdon in the face. His eyes keep

wandering, heading looking every which way except forward.

“I don’t know why I felt personally responsible, but someone once told me we’re only responsible for our own actions. I should not have disrupted your recovery with my own…problems. For that, I’m sorry.”

Langdon raised an eyebrow. “Robby, you can feel however you want about me. Just—don’t think that my problems say anything about you. Or everything about me. I need you to trust me.”

Like you did before, goes unsaid but heard.

From under his eyelashes, Robby stares up at him. His lip twitches in the hint of a smile. “Well, don’t you sound emotionally intelligent.”

He shrugs, leaning his body against his closed locker. “I’m a hack. I pay someone money to tell me what to say.”

“So, therapy’s working?”

A full smile blossoms on his face, pulling at his cheeks. “What do you think? You just called me emotionally intelligent, but….”

“But?”

“You’re the most emotionally stunted person I know. And I know myself.”

Robby’s face contorts. His eyebrows raise like he’s been confronted with some puzzling anomaly.

“You should give it a try,” Langdon suggests.

He sees how easily the words will fall on deaf ears. Some employee had told him the same thing during his first week at the rehab facility. Langdon vaguely remembers telling them to ‘go fuck themselves,” and seeing white-hot anger towards that person for even hinting at the fact he wasn’t in complete control.

Robby shrugs, more of a shag of his shoulder than an indication that he’s responding to Langdon. His sigh brushes against his jacket before he looks back up at Langdon.

“See you on Monday,” Robby says, eventually.

“Yeah.” Before he thinks twice about it, Langdon shouts, “hey, thank you!”

His words bounce off Robby's back as he walks away. He waves a hand in the air to Langdon. Langdon's eyes hover over the spot Robby had been standing in long after he left through the doors.

"Doctor Langdon?"

Langdon startles, slamming his locker shut. Behind him, Mel jumps too.

"Sorry about that," Langdon says. He smiles, trying to ease the alarmed look off her face. Her smile back is fidgety. "What can I do for you, Mel?"

"I was wondering if you were leaving now."

"Yeah. Just grabbing my stuff. Are you leaving too?"

Mel nods, hands gripping the straps of her bag. "I'm going to pick up my sister."

"I'll walk with you."

"Oh—uhh. You don't have to do that."

"It's okay," he says. "I want to. We haven't really had much time to catch up, yeah?"

"That's true. Are you…sure?"

"Yeah. I could use the air myself. Besides, you shouldn't be walking out this late at night by yourself."

He pushes open the exit, letting Mel out first. She spins, so her body is still facing Langdon as she explains, "Thank you for the concern, but I'm not alone. I've got my sister with me."

Langdon huffs. The fresh evening air is a nice change from the months of summer humidity.

"How's she doing, by the way?"

Mel's smile grows as she begins talking about an old movie they watched together. Her easy companionship is also a nice change.

It's an early Saturday morning. So early that even his kids aren't awake yet. Langdon transformed the corner of his bedroom into a

workout space, even if all he has is a mat and a few weights.

A tiny knock slips through the headphones during a gap of an *ABBA* song. The handle fidgets, rattling in place before swinging open. Tanner trots into his room, pajamas bunched up and hair standing on its ends.

Langdon rolls around from his plank. “Hey, buddy. What’s going on?”

Tanner’s silent as he plops himself onto Langdon’s chest. He takes a minute to fix himself. Tiny legs rest on his stomach as even tinier arms curl around his neck.

It’s an instinct to wrap an arm underneath and another around Tanner to keep him from falling.

“What’s the matter?” Langdon asks again in a hurried voice.

Tanner’s eyelashes brush against his cheek. Everything about him in this stage is so delicate, Langdon frightens himself just looking at him.

“I want to be with you,” Tanner mumbles.

Langdon breathes out, and it’s a weak stutter. Water blots in his eyes. “Okay. I’m here.”

“Can we listen to songs?”

“Yeah, but not too loud. We don’t want to wake up your sister.”

With one arm curled around his son, he uses his other arm to keep them propped up. His arm cramps, and Langdon plops them flat on the ground.

He disconnects his headphones and resumes his queue. Skips past *The Smiths* and onto a different song. He has a deep, almost nostalgic love for that band, but they may just be too much of a mood killer for his five year old.

Langdon spends ten minutes laying on the floor just holding his son. His unruly hair is all over his face, but Langdon doesn’t budge. Their breathing syncs up, and with every inhale he takes, Tanner exhales against the collar of his shirt. It’s nice until a minor ache begins to wake in his back.

“Come on, buddy,” Langdon says, patting Tanner’s back. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

Even if McKay's the only person as of recent to have tasted his food, he doesn't want to subject Tanner to his horrific cooking. He settles on toast with peanut butter and a sliced banana.

Afterwards, Langdon sits on the couch with a heating pad against the cushion and his back. He watches Tanner bash some of his monster truck toys together.

"I miss the doggy," Tanner says out of nowhere.

"That's alright. You'll see it once you go back to mom's."

"Mommy said that you—uhh—it's back at the doggy home."

"Your mom doesn't have the dog?" Langdon asks, voice shifting like he's talking to an adult. Like Abby's at the other end of the room to explain what exactly happened to that goldendoodle.

Tanner shakes his head. He looks back down at his monster trucks. Winds the toy back up. The mechanical click-click-click of the cogs dims as Langdon dials Robby's number. His anxiety starts to ramp up with each ring.

"What's wrong?" Robby questions after that final dial, voice hurried.

What an odd thing for him to ask, but Langdon thinks this must be the first time he's ever called Robby since that day. Those wretched voice messages he spammed Robby with still haunt him.

They've never been huge on texting or calling. It certainly is strange for Langdon to be asking for him this way. Especially given the shaky terms they're on right now.

"Nothing," Langdon breathes. "Don't worry. I'm okay."

"Good."

Over the phone, Robby's voice is a deep, guttural thing that sends the hairs on his neck standing.

He's not sure how to continue this conversation without sounding like a stuttering idiot, and he's glad Robby continues with, "thought you had your kids today."

"Yeah," Langdon says when he wets his tongue. "About that. Do you… do you still have my dog?"

The line goes quiet. Almost as if Robby hung up entirely. Langdon's about to repeat himself before Robby speaks up.

"She's been a nice addition to the house."

He's baffled, and a wave of questions in his head jumbles around. He can't seem to figure out which one to ask first. Robby, always so quick and efficient, fills in the gaps.

"You never told me where Abby lived, and at the time, you weren't exactly in the right mind to tell me."

"Oh."

Robby's sigh is fond even over the static. "Don't think I've ever heard someone tell a dog to go to hell before."

Tanner chases the monster truck across the living room. He uses his whole body to move around, flopping around like it's a race track. His downstairs neighbors must despise him.

"I said *what*?"

"You told me I was going to rot in hell and to take the dog with me."

Langdon laughs before realizing that it's actually not that funny, because *he's* the one who said it. The humor of it all quickly fades into horror.

"Robby, I am so sorry."

"You've already apologized."

"I know, but—"

"Enough of that. If you keep this up, you're gonna be apologizing for the rest of your life. Isn't that what you told me not to do?"

"Yeah…yeah."

They're both silent. His eyes haze over as he watches Tanner talk to the monster truck. There's some poor driver inside that truck being thrown around by a five year old.

"Wanna come over?"

The words are an immediate punch to his stomach.

“What?”

“I figured the kids might want to see the dog. It’s not fair to them that I’ve been hoarding her all this time.”

Langdon rubs a hand down his face. God, he’s not only an idiot, but he’s lovestruck and bashful like a school girl. Can imagine himself laid out twirling an old school phone wire around his finger and kicking his feet in the air.

“Only if you’re sure. My kids take a lot of energy to handle.”

“Must really take after you, then.” It’s such an endearing statement, that Langdon feels a flush rise to his face. “They’ll need the dog to tire them out then.”

“Okay. Yeah. I’ll be over soon.” Langdon wants to hang up right this second. He yanks the phone back to his ear. “Wait, where do you live?”

After mentioning a dog, it only takes twenty minutes to wrangle his children into their winter coats and into the booster seats. He makes sure to pack snacks after Charlotte starts biting the ends of her growing hair.

He parks on the street. It’s only after he plops his kids on the ground that he gives himself the time to actually take in Robby’s home.

It’s a two story townhouse. Quaint but enough space to fit a mini garage unit. Must be where the motorcycle fits, because the driveway is completely clear, like no one lives here. They trot up to the front door, and Langdon uses his foot to knock on the door.

It takes a few moments, but Robby eventually swings the door open. His leg covers the entryway, and for a good reason. An excited goldendoodle tries to squeeze its head past him.

His kids start to jump and pet the dog before the door has even been cracked open like they forgot this was the whole point of them coming here.

“Hey, let him open the door first,” he says.

Abby used to chastise him for never being able to reel the kids in. Never discipling them and in favor of letting them run wild. He used to call bullshit on that, but now he realizes he was just doubling down

to avoid acknowledging that he had no idea how to even *be* a parent. His own terror transformed his behavior into negligence.

Alanna gifted him some parental guide books that have been helping. They must be, since his kids actually listen to him and back away from the door. Excitement radiates off their faces as they allow Robby to hold the dog back and let them inside.

As his kids let themselves be pushed around by the dog, Langdon takes in the sight before him.

Robby's stuffed himself in a cotton sweater that sits just above his grey sweatpants. The thin space between the two reveals the band of his boxers. His reading glasses are closed, hanging off the collar of his navy sweater.

He gulps down whatever saliva is in his mouth.

The heating melts the brisk November air off his shoulders, but what really warms his body up is the steady flush rising to his face. Robby raises an eyebrow at him before motioning to the living room.

"Thanks for this," Langdon starts.

Robby plops onto the couch. The book on the cushion gets set on the side table. His arm lays on the rest, propping his chin up. It's such a domestic image that Langdon feels frozen at the sight, feet glued to the ground.

"It's not a problem. Half the days, I barely have the energy to keep up with her."

"That tends to happen when you're getting old."

"Ohoh, someone brought the jokes with them."

"Didn't want you to get lonely."

Langdon's grinning so hard, his cheeks hurt from the pull. There's surely dimples and wrinkles forming around his mouth with the effort. He plops down on the other end of the couch.

He doesn't bother hiding his amusement when Robby looks over. His eyes scan up and down, his own smile hiding behind curled fingers and a thick beard.

Tanner runs over to him. He leans against Langdon's shins, tiny hands

clutched hard in his knees. He wobbles side to side as he stares up at Robby.

“Hi,” Tanner says.

“Hi there.”

“What’s your name?”

“You can call me Robby.”

“Hi Robby.” Tanner’s o’s have been curling at the beginning, sounding a little too similar to his a’s.

“You must be Tanner,” Robby says back. He leans forward, elbows digging into his knees.

“How do you know!”

“Your dad talks about you a whole lot.”

“Oh! Why do you know my dad?”

“We work together.”

“At the hospital?”

“Yep.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And you have a dog.”

“I do.”

“That’s cool. My dad’s a doctor too, but he doesn’t have a dog.”

As engrossing as it is to watch Robby talk to his kid like he’s a grown adult, he doesn’t want to exhaust him. “Alright, buddy.”

Doll jumps onto the couch and curls herself next to Robby’s thigh. Charlotte follows the dog. Her feet grow hesitant when she realizes she’ll have to step closer to a stranger.

“It’s okay,” Langdon reassures. “This is daddy’s friend from work.”

“Hi,” Robby says with a wave. Then, he points to the dog who has curled into a ball beside him. “Her name is Doll. Do you want to pet her?”

Charlotte nods and bounds forward. She smushes herself against the couch so that she’s eye level with Doll. The dog stares back with a playful look. Her tail keeps thumping against the cushion.

“Let her sniff you first. Just like this.”

Robby places his hand palm down in front of Doll. She sniffs his finger once before lapping at him. He pulls away and lets Charlotte do the same. It takes a few more loud sniffs before Doll is doing the same to her.

Charlotte giggles. “She’s silly!”

“I think she likes you,” Robby whispers, leaning in close like it’s a secret between the two of them.

Doll leaps off the couch and begins standing in random parts of the room. She baits his kids into chasing her around before running circles around them.

Langdon watches, smile fond, before scooting closer on the couch. Robby watches from the corner of his eye with a similar look in his eyes.

“You were right,” Langdon says.

“Hmm?”

“Dogs and kids.” Robby raises an eyebrow. Langdon continues, “they go well together.”

Robby keeps staring at him. His mouth stays the same, flat and stoic, but there’s a glint to his eyes that’s almost cheeky.

“They do, don’t they.”

Langdon’s not sure what the hell is stuck in his throat that stops him from responding. He turns away to watch his kids instead.

Might just be the safest option.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for your support so far!! i have most of this written out already, but i was growing a little unconfident every time i'd look at it. im very glad this is something people want to read :)

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You still go to meetings?” Langdon asks.

McKay’s flopped across her couch. She’s scrolling through something on her phone. It’s like his words bounced off the back of her head.

“Cass.”

“Hmm?” McKay looks over her shoulder. Her mind must have caught up to the conversation. She’s honestly worse than some teenagers he’s met at the ER when it comes to phone use. “It’s been a while. Usually, I’ll go if I’m feeling really bad.”

“Bad how?”

She cranes her head up from the arm rest. “Are you not feeling good?”

Langdon shakes his head. He scoops the chicken he cooked into their bowls of rice. Carries them over and places them on the coffee table.

“The opposite, actually. I feel like nothing could ever go wrong again. It’s pretty great.”

McKay exhales. “You should definitely go to your next meeting.”

Langdon’s eye nearly burst out of his head. “Don’t you think that’s kind of an extreme response? I’m finally happy, Cass. Or, I don’t know. Something that feels good for the first time in months.”

“I’m not saying being happy is a bad thing. If something happens, and you crash, it takes twice as much effort to come back.”

He…hadn’t thought about it like that. His mind was so focused on how *good* everything was right now that it was easy to ignore the bad. It made forgetting the stipulations of his return to the Pitt just as effortless.

Langdon sighs, pushing McKay’s feet up and plops himself under. His hand instinctively lands on her ankle.

“Recovery isn’t a straight line up,” McKay says. “You’re going to have

bad days where everything seems fucked and life isn't really worth it. You'll even have great days when everything is going just right. Most of the time, you'll kinda just feel like you're somewhere in between."

"Looks like we got modern day Goldilocks over here."

McKay snorts. "I'm serious. Now turn on the game. I need to see the Philly Flyers get the shit kicked outta them."

Langdon looks around for the remote. He checks under the couch and finds it tucked with a thin layer of dust.

"I *told* Harrison to be careful with that," McKay groans.

"He doing good?"

"Yeah. I just can't believe he's already in seventh grade."

Langdon presses his lips together in some unimpressed look. "You said that last year when he went into sixth grade."

She glares at him, before smirking. "Oh, you'll be saying the same things once your little ones break past Kindergarten."

He scoffs. "Yeah alright. Hey, I thought you didn't even like hockey."

"Yeah, but I'm trying to understand the appeal of it, so…."

Langdon cannot believe his ears. He grins, shaking McKay's ankles. "Cass, are you trying to impress someone?"

"What? Hell no."

"Someone has a crush! Isn't that adorable."

McKay flounders. "We went on *one* date."

"Do I get to be your maid of honor?"

McKay grins and shoves him sideways. "Only if I get to be yours."

Langdon raises an eyebrow. "I'm a divorced doctor in recovery. Who would *I* be marrying right now?"

"I think you know."

Langdon's mind is blank for a minute. He remembers his small

wedding with Abby right after the peak of COVID. When he blinks, there's someone else across the aisle, and he paces across the room to throw away the thought.

"You're hilarious, you know that?" Langdon grumbles.

"You're in the way of the TV—move over."

Langdon is on fucking *fire* today. He's discharged several patients already, seen even more on top of that. Made some stellar diagnostic catches that saved even *more* lives. He's breaking records he didn't even know he had.

Well, maybe he's not as quick on his feet as he was when the pills were crushing any anxiety weighing him down, but maybe that's for the better. A certain amount of stress can be healthy. Performance-enhancing, even.

Robby seems to be noticing, because he's starting to hear those same old praises fall from his lips more often than not.

Every incision is met with a *'right there,'* and with every judgement call is a *'good job.'*

It pushes him to do better. Not in that drug-induced haze of trying to shoot above every set standard of care. Climb higher and higher to reach the top of the nonexistant scoreboard. Take down any challenge that comes his way.

This time, his motivations are different. There's a layer of direct compassion to his clinical attention that the drugs had subdued. He forgot he had that in him, and it's like running into an old friend when he realizes it's there.

The outcome of his successes is still the same as well. It's not to impress Robby, be the best he's ever seen, but *damn* does it feel good to see the look in Robby's eyes with every right answer he gets.

So, when Robby places a clinical hand to the top of his shoulders and mumbles 'nicely done' low into his ear, Langdon doesn't think twice about the shaky heat that burns through him.

It's just the success of a job well done.

Then, it happens again, and again, and again. And it happens nearly

every hour, because Langdon's a master at his job, and he's hardly ever wrong.

Robby's rich voice coursing through his mind, replaying over and over again. Telling him how *good* he's doing and how *efficient* he is.

Every so often, a cold palm grips his spine and sends that message straight into his body. And every single time, Langdon feels that same electrifying shock light him up from
the inside out.

Langdon's not an idiot. It may take him a few trials and errors, but his pattern-recognition is perfectly intact.

He's getting turned on by his boss praising him.

The worst part is that he keeps encouraging this feeling.

With every praise, every call of his name, Langdon seeks him out with that same open look. He's always ready for whatever Robby's willing to give him. Whatever challenge he thinks Langdon can learn from, no matter how tricky of a problem.

"Doctor Langdon! Over here with me," Robby shouts as the EMTs rush in the MVC patient.

When Robby calls, Langdon follows.

And it feels *good* to follow.

"On it, boss!"

7:42 AM, and some asshole in chairs is already trying to start a fight.

"I've been here all night, dude!"

Langdon hadn't meant to be the one to get yelled at. He was only out here to update a family member of a patient in the back, but here they are. Santos stands behind him with an even more detached expression than him, lab results in hand.

"We're working as fast as we can, I assure you," Langdon says, turning to the aggravated man. "You'll be seen soon."

"Soon?! It's been fucking *hours!*"

The man's face is flushed blood red. Half of their future patients in chairs scoot away from the hostility while the other half ignore the incident entirely. Langdon takes a quick exhale.

"If you want to clock in and help us out, be my guest, but if not, we're going to get back to helping the patients back there to see the patients up here quicker. Does that sound like a plan?"

In hindsight, it probably wasn't the smartest thing to say to an agitated guy twice his size. Hindsight's a bitch though, and he's not one to back down from a pissing contest.

The guy bolts up, chair kicking the people beside him. Langdon steps back. The guy moves at a languid pace. He makes up for the almost leisurely pace with mass.

His hefty arm slings back. Before Langdon can holler anything to Santos, he socks her in the nose with his elbow. It's an accident, he can tell from the panic on the man's face. The satisfying crack drains the color from his face.

Out of the corner of his vision, Ahmad rushes in. Both arms wrap around the man, wrangling him out of the room, but the damage has been done.

"See you never!" Langdon shouts.

He spins around to Santos. She's hovering a hand beneath her nose. Her nostrils have turned into faucets. Blood gushes out, staining her skin a dark red.

"Alright, c'mon," Langdon ushers her, hand hovering her shoulder.

"I've—I've got it," she stammers, quick and rattled. Her fingers clip the base of her nose, keeping her head leaned forward.

"Stop clamping so hard."

"I said I've got it!"

"I'm not saying you don't!"

Their breaths are loud in the waiting room, if only because everyone else has hushed to overhear their argument.

Langdon looks around, and waves a hand. "Nothing to see, people."

Heads turn away, and Langdon buzzes them into the back. They take up a spare room that's miraculously empty. She sits down, still staring at him like he's about to deliver the final blow.

"Move your hand. I need to check for a nasal fracture."

"I'm a doctor too, you know," she jests, though the frown on her face tells him she's certainly not in the mood to joke around.

He hands her a bowl to hold under her chin to keep the blood from splattering out. She disregards it entirely.

"I know," Langdon says with a sigh. After a moment, he adds, "which also means you know I need to do this."

Her eyes lock onto him. Narrowed and hard with shoulders tensed up. When Langdon shows he's serious about this, her hand falls away from her face.

Gloved, Langdon pokes and prods the skins around her nose. Her eyes are roaming anywhere that's not Langdon's eyes. He can't help the fact this procedure requires him to be up in her space.

"Follow my fingers."

Santos rolls her eyes.

"With your eyes," Langdon emphasizes.

It's a small mercy that she complies, following the movement of his finger just fine. He brings out the flashlight to check her pupils then moves lower to look for a septal hematoma. There's blood smeared all over her face, but that appears to be the most of the damage.

"Looks like you'll live," Langdon admits, leaning back.

"He wasn't that strong," she snorts quietly.

"He was like…6'4—270."

"And I'd still kick his ass."

"Good for you. He still socked you in the face."

Santos scoffs, turning to him. "I did wrestling in high school."

"I doubt that counts. Everyone's scrawny in high school."

“Maybe you,” Santos mutters.

He raises an eyebrow. “I did track in high school. I had to be lean.”

“Track? Go figures,” she mutters.

Langdon raises an eyebrow. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Santos is grinning. She looks crazy, teeth splattered with watered-down red and her face smeared with blood. It’s infectious, because Langdon feels his own heart drumming to the insanity of the situation.

Her eyes look to the side for a split second, and her mouth clamps shut. She clears her throat and straightens her posture.

“You two get into it with each other?”

Langdon looks over to the entryway. Robby’s standing with crossed arms. It takes him a moment to realize he’s joking around, but there’s a strange tone in his voice that suggests he’s being cautious.

Not that he truly has the belief the two of them would fight in the hospital, but that their shared history still lingers on his mind like unwanted company.

He's not the only one still reminiscing, but Langdon's been trying to forgive himself and move on. Show Santos that he's not the same. That he can be *good.* He knows now that he owes it to the people in his life to be there for them.

“Some asshole in chairs took a swing and accidentally hit Santos,” Langdon explains. He pulls off the gloves and discards them.

Robby steps forward. “Nasal fracture?”

“No, it just looks bad. She’ll pull through.”

“Oh, wow,” Santos utters, aloof. “I was so worried. Thank you so very much.”

“No problem. Now, cash or card? We don’t take insurance here, so—”

“Alright, enough playtime. Doctor Langdon, get back to work,” Robby interjects. “You okay, Doctor Santos?”

“I’m okay,” she mumbles.

Robby nods. “Once you’re ready, we will go report this incident.”

“But, I’m fine,” Santos explains hurriedly again.

Robby shakes his head. “I will not have an incident against one of my staff members go under the radar. The administration upstairs needs to know how dangerous our jobs are, and I’m not in the business of letting my staff not be heard. Got that?”

Santos sighs, but she nods. No one here enjoys the red tape of hospital administration.

“Good.”

Robby gives one passing glance to Langdon, slapping his shoulder with an open palm, before exiting.

The rare touch ignites a giddy energy in him. It’s his excuse as to why he hands a grumpy Santos an ice pack. He’s not sure that in any other mood, he would have extended such an obvious olive branch.

“Here,” Langdon says. “Chill out in the break room.”

Santos opens her mouth, and he thinks she’s about to attempt to argue with him again, so he beats her to the punch.

“You’re a good doctor, but you can’t help patients if you’re bleeding all over them. Give yourself a break.”

She huffs. It’s the closest he’s seen of a laugh from her, and for the first time, he feels like he’s reached her where she’s at. It’s progress, he thinks.

It’s 4:52 PM when his power shuts off. He only notices at first, because a chill creeps down his shirt. Langdon looks up from an article Robby had sent him to find himself plunged into the darkness that comes with early winter evenings.

Abby comes by twenty minutes later. She lets herself in now.

“What’s with all the lights?”

“Power outage,” Langdon says, ushering the kids inside. They stomp snow on the floor mat before digging their boots off.

“Frank, it’s too cold for them to be here without any power.”

“Want me to use a spell and magically make the power turn on again? I left my wand at the old place.”

“This isn’t funny. The kids could get really sick.”

Langdon doesn’t bother explaining the nuances of colds to Abby, which he knows because he’s a doctor, thank you very much. It’s much easier to just nod and wave her off.

It only takes half an hour of the heating seeping out of the apartment and seven minutes of watching his kids shiver in front of the portable heater to dump a heap of guilt down his throat. He makes a desperate call, foot tapping and antsy.

The dial seems to last an eternity, the quiet that lulls between each ring spanning longer and longer. After a moment, the voice on the other end speaks.

Langdon cuts them off before the other side gets a chance to even say a word. “I really hate to ask this of you, man.”

“Slow down,” Robby says. His voice leaves a heavy weight on his chest, forcing him to take a deep breath from miles away. “What happened?”

“I lost power, and I’ve got the kids for the weekend. There’s no update on when it’ll get fixed, and I can’t stand watching them like this.”

“You want to bring them over?”

Langdon nearly sobs. “Yes, please. Robby, they’re so little.”

“It’s no problem. Let yourselves in when you get here.”

“Thanks, man.”

He bunches the kids into the back of the car with extra blankets. His hands reach for the heat as soon as he gets the car going. The snow is light, but he’s glad he listened to Abby’s weather prediction, because even he can tell it’s going to pile up real soon.

If he hadn’t left when he did, Langdon has a strong feeling they’d be trapped inside for the whole weekend.

Pulling up in the driveway, he unbuckles his kids and slings their bags onto each shoulder. They run up to the door and bang like they’re about to ding-dong-ditch.

“Be careful with that,” Langdon calls. He curses, going back to the car to get his own bag.

By the time he locks the car, his kids have managed to realize the door is unlocked and invited themselves in. Stupid Robby and his generation. No sense of safety whatsoever.

When he’s inside, Robby’s crouched down on the floor with his kids. Tanner balances himself on Robby’s arm as Doll licks his hand. Charlotte’s much more shy. Always has been, but she's warming up to Robby faster than other adults she's been around.

“Doll remembers you,” Robby reassures. He scratches behind the dog’s ear. “Don’t you, girl?”

Doll sniffs Charlotte’s hand, tail wagging like a propeller. She stands on her hind legs, paws digging into Charlotte’s arms.

“Look, she’s dancing with you,” Robby says with a point.

Charlotte giggles, and Langdon has to bite his lip to keep himself from tearing up. The ‘him’ from a year ago would have called him a sensitive wuss.

And, maybe he is if it means he gets to be proud of being emotional over the people in his life. It’s no longer a threat—reaching for compassion and vulnerability instead of lashing out.

“I ordered pizza before you arrived," Robby announces.

He stands, groaning as a bone pops. The sound replays over and over in Langdon’s mind, and that really shouldn’t be the focal point of his attention on Robby.

"They can have that, right? This is going to be really awkward if they can’t.”

“We can! Please?” Tanner pleads.

His compassion is dizzying. Langdon almost forgets that everyone’s staring up at him for an answer. “Yeah, go ahead—don’t feed any to Doll, okay?”

“‘kay!”

His kids speed past Robby as they pile themselves onto the dining table chairs. They grab at the paper plates and open the steaming

boxes.

“You okay?” Robby whispers, stepping closer. They’re nearly the same height, but he’s got his knees bunched, head down to be eye level with him.

“Yeah. Thank you again, Robby. Really.”

Robby scoffs, shaking his head like he can’t—or shouldn’t—take credit for his generosity.

"You won’t be thanking me once you realize I ordered from that place you hate.”

“Angelo’s? You know their crust is way too thick.”

Robby shrugs, walking into the kitchen. “They were the only place willing to travel this far in the snow.”

Langdon sighs. He looks over at the table to watch Tanner and Charlotte devour the slices. Can’t complain too much when they’re warm and full of food.

Well, their pizza *does* suck. Two things can be true at the same time.

“Doll, come here,” Robby suddenly orders softly.

Langdon’s immediate feeling is confusion, because he’s standing right there behind him. He takes a step forward anyway. Robby stares at him over his shoulder with an equally confused look.

Doll pushes off from the kitchen chair she had been trying to climb into and scurries over. Her paws scratching against the floor are the only noise loud enough to get past the rush of blood in Langdon’s ears.

With the heat rushing to his cheeks, Langdon thinks he must be sweltering red right now.

Of course Robby had been talking to the fucking *dog*.

Robby’s head bends low, entering Langdon’s personal bubble. Langdon forces himself to look up. Pretend like his insides aren’t boiling him alive and setting his skin on fire.

“Thought I was talking to you?” Robby coos.

Langdon has to clench his fists, twiddle his thumbs, do something

with his hands before he grabs at Robby's chest. Needs a timeout to think, because his brain is all mushy and haywire right now and melting from how on fire his face feels.

"No," Langdon argues. It's a useless and unbelievable defense.

Robby's face is straight, mouth curled neither up or down. The only emotion Langdon can see this close is the amusement in his eyes. His breath ghosts his neck when he talks.

"You'll know when I'm calling for you," Robby whispers.

There's a spike of something warm coursing in him. Like the heating system has been plugged directly into his veins, igniting him up from the inside.

All he can do is nod, head heavy with inebriating thoughts. Robby nods too, like they just had some powerful debriefing at work. He turns away to seat himself next to Charlotte.

"I hope you left some slices for me," Robby jokes.

Charlotte peeks up at him, moving the box closer. "Here you go."

"Oh, why thank you."

Langdon bites his bottom lip. There's a pulsing indent of teeth there, surely, but it keeps his emotions from bubbling over.

He can do this. One minute at a time. He sits himself next to Tanner, who engrosses him for the whole meal about his day at pre-K.

It's an unusual day for the kids, being at Robby's house, which translates in their tiny minds as a special treat. Especially because he doesn't believe in making them do their homework or practice sheets on Fridays. They have the whole weekend to do that.

Langdon lets them stay up past their curfews to watch the end of the movie. Some new animated movie that kind of just looks like all the other animated movies Langdon has seen advertised in the past three years. They all blur together, but his kids seem to enjoy all the flashing colors, so he supposes it won't do them any harm.

As the credits start rolling, he begins ushering them upstairs to get them ready for bedtime. It's a lot easier here than it would be at his apartment. They're more nervous to put up a fight with Robby's eyes

on them.

Well, actually, that's not true. Charlotte crawls up the stairs like usual without her usual grumpiness. He has to wrangle Tanner upside down, holding his legs on his shoulders, just to get him upstairs.

"Should you be holding him like that?" Robby asks once Langdon comes downstairs twenty minutes later.

He's reading a book and has propped himself in the rocking chair Charlotte had sat in. His legs are gently pushing off the ground in the same way Charlotte had to use her full body to rock herself back-and-forth.

Langdon shrugs. "He'll be alright. If it gets him moving, then it's worth it. Trust me, I've tried everything else."

"Who am I to tell you what to do with your kids," Robby says with a huff. He turns back to the book. "You tired yet?"

"Yeah, actually. Do you mind if I….?"

"Go ahead. I'm not the boss of you."

"Well, you are, actually."

Robby looks at him through the top of his glasses. "Funny."

Langdon can't keep the grin off his face. Lets the tingling feeling of holding Robby's attention settle before looking at the couch. It's going to be a bitch on his back, but he'll work with it.

"You mind if I have a blanket?"

"For what?"

"You going to let me sleep on the couch without any sort of cover? That's *cold,* man."

"Who said anything about you sleeping on the couch?"

Langdon tilts his head. Sort of like a confused dog, but he doesn't enjoy making that analogy about himself. But he *is* perplexed, because Tanner has taken up one bedroom and Charlotte in the other. The only other bedroom he had seen was Robby's.

Langdon looks around and points a thumb to the hallway. "Are you

saying…."

"Use my room," Robby says, casually. Off Langdon's complete silence and gaping mouth, Robby adds," unless you want to sleep on the couch...."

"Nope!" Langdon shouts before fleeing the room. He has to spin back around to grab his bag. Robby's lingering gaze *won't* trip him up. Hopefully.

Stepping into Robby's bathroom is odd. Opening a facet of Robby's life that he hadn't even considered makes his head throb. Flicking the light switch brings a wave of sensory input about Robby's daily life that's almost too intimate for Langdon to handle properly.

As he empties his backpack, his own products start to outweigh the number of Robby's stuff he sees on the counter. Robby owns just the bare essentials. Deodorant, toothbrush and paste, a towel. Living like a man in survival mode.

He lets the absurdity of the situation drown in the sink as he washes his face. Pats it down. Rubs moisturizer that Abby had forced him to start wearing and tries not to linger on the excess of spare towels or the layer of dust over the mirror or the almost expired pack of nicotine gum in the drawer.

His bedroom is somehow even more sparse. Forest green comforter and two pillows. A nightstand on each side of the bed with a lamp, a book, a digital clock and…that's it. Not a single picture lines the dresser. Just a mirror reflecting the hollow reality back to him.

Langdon digs a knee into the bed. It's plush, but firm, and he automatically knows he will sleep very well.

Once he's able to move past the odd feeling gnawing at his chest.

And the throbbing loneliness he feels draped over the room.

Robby's just down the stairs, but Langdon feels as though he's been isolated from the whole world. No one can reach him in this room no matter how hard they try and maybe that's by design.

He blinks his eyes real hard. If he squeezes tight enough, maybe it'll trick his brain into falling asleep. To stop thinking about how Robby lays here every night, by himself, on this same pillow and under this same duvet.

Well, *hopefully* by himself.

Langdon does *not* want to start thinking about what sort of activities Robby gets up to in his bed. He's trying to fall asleep, damnit, not set his body on fire with all the heat going south.

Langdon tosses and turns. Feels consciousness slip in and out of his hands. The world spins in different shades of dark as he tumbles into his dreams.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep, because a haze clouds his thinking. It's what stops him from overthinking how close the figure looming over him is. It slips into the bed, plaid pajama bottoms slinking under the covers.

"Robby?" Langdon mumbles.

He moves to lean up, catch a better look from the moonlight peeking in through a slit from the blinds, but a solid hand on his shoulder pushes him back down.

"Go back to sleep," a rugged voice responds.

"'kay."

His hand reaches out. Fingers grasp at the cloth of the shirt in front of him. Doesn't even question it when that same hand from before intertwines their fingers. Langdon falls back asleep, tethered to the hand keeping him still in the dark and quiet of the night.

The room is blurry, sleep clinging to his eyes. On the bedside counter, the digital clock reads 3:13 AM. He's surprised he slept so soundly.

Langdon stretches, palming at the cover. He tucks himself in. If he's lucky, he can get another three hours.

He tries to drift under the cloud of sleep before yanking the comforter off.

This is not my fucking bed, Langdon thinks.

His head whips around and looks for Robby. He's not expecting the other side of the bed to be empty—and *cold.* The comforter is tucked around him like he was the only one ever there to begin with.

Like a flash of light, any trace of Robby has vanished.

Langdon plants his feet on the ground. The adrenaline has kicked his body into gear, and there's no point in trying to go to sleep. Not when there's some tiny voice in his head telling him there's something off.

The downstairs is drenched in monochrome shades of blue. Maybe if the moon was a little fuller, he could see his way around. The only light to guide him are the motion-activated night lights plugged along the walls. He wanders around, his footsteps the only sound awake.

Light highlights the bottom of the garage door. Trepidation begins to fill his lungs. A hand floats with a tremor above the door handle. If he doesn't go now, Langdon fears he may just turn around and go back to bed. He pushes past his own paranoia and opens the door.

There's a singular light bulb hanging from the middle of the room. It's an old thing, flickering and attached to a string. That string dangles above Robby's bent head like a limp noose. He's curled into himself, body nearly parallel with the motorcycle he's sitting on.

"Hey," Langdon says.

He takes the two steps down into the garage. A chill races up his socked feet. If he stays here for long, he may lose a couple toes.

Robby doesn't answer. Barely acknowledges his presence besides the smallest head movement in his direction.

"Go back inside." Robby's voice is strange. Husky and hollow like he hasn't spoken in days.

Langdon takes another step, much more cautious this time. "What are you up to, man?"

Wind wails outside, banging against the metal garage door. It groans and rattles as the winter storm rages on. Robby doesn't seem to mind. Like this is exactly where he wants to be.

"I'm going for a ride," Robby says.

Langdon raises an eyebrow. "...during a snow storm without a helmet?"

"Yeah." Robby says as much, but his body language holds no conviction. He's just…sitting there. Hunched over and eyes glued to the ground. His hands aren't even on the bars.

“You’re going to kill yourself,” Langdon scoffs.

Robby’s eyes shoot open wide, scandalized like the mere idea was a personal attack on his character. He had said it as a joke, a crass attempt to lighten the mode.

Fuck, Langdon thinks. *Robby’s actually suicidal.*

And neither of them knew it.

Langdon leans back, trying equally to give him space and see his expression. The dim lightbulb of the garage does nothing to clear the shadows falling over Robby’s face.

“Are you….” The words get stuck in his throat. He doesn’t want to voice even the possibility that Robby’s trying to kill himself.

How many times has he done this? Hopped on his bike and rode into a new day with half-ass hopes of crashing. If he makes it all the way to work, then it just…what? Wasn’t meant to happen? He’ll try, try again when the mood strikes?

Robby shakes his head, a minute movement Langdon almost misses. Then, he moves quicker, more determined in his resolve.

“I’m just running away.”

“From what?”

“You.”

Langdon’s heart shatters. Feels that delicate muscle hammer against his ribs. “Did I…do something?”

“You’re too good,” Robby mutters. His voice quivers like an arrow striking the air, wobbling and sharp.

“What? Robby—”

“I’m such a fuck up, Frank. You shouldn't see this. Please just—just go back inside.”

His head is still forced down, but the shine he sees flicker in eyes lets him know everything. Langdon inches closer. His hand hovers over Robby’s shoulder. It feels inappropriate. Like touching a statue at the museum.

“If you want to feel like shit, that’s...understandable. Feeling like you deserve it. I've been there too."

Langdon swallows, and the words fall out his mouth like a boulder tumbling down the side of a mountain. Enormous and unstoppable.

"But you don't have to sit out here thinking that freezing yourself into a hypothermic coma is some sort of atonement. When you're ready, we can go inside—where it's warmer.”

Robby looks up. He’s smiling, but it isn’t a pretty thing. It’s weak and fluttering. Like a butterfly on the verge of dying, flapping its wings as a hopeless last measure.

He may have to pull Robby off that deathtrap of a vehicle. Between the two of them, despite the height similarities, Robby has much more muscle over him. It would be a tough fight, but he can’t just *leave* him here. Robby is going inside with him one way or a-fucking-nother.

Just when he’s about to step forward to rip him off the damn thing, Robby starts to stand up. Langdon’s frozen as he watches him curl away from the bike.

They walk inside together, Robby a few paces behind him. Langdon’s not entirely sure how to navigate this situation.

Robby has always been the one to be ‘large and in charge’ at the hospital. Now, they’re in his home, and Langdon’s leading him around like a dog on a leash. The change in dynamics pushes him off balance.

Langdon takes them to the living room. Much harder to seep in a depressive slump upright on the couch than laying down in bed. He would know. The first few weeks of sobriety were spent curled up in the facility’s dorms to his old bedroom at his parent’s house.

It was a fitting sight. He had felt pathetic and weak.

There’s no reason for Robby to make himself go through the same thing—alone, at least, if he insists.

He sits Robby’s body down on the couch. It's almost too easy to maneuver someone with more muscle than him. Robby pushes him away with a gentle, barely there movement.

The fireplace in front of them looks functional if the wood logs are any indicator. He feels across the mantle for a lighter. It takes a few

tries before the kindle bursts into flames.

He watches for a few moments as the fire eats away at the wood, exploding the fireplace with vibrant reds and yellows.

His next stop is the kitchen. Damn Robby and his hatred for the convenience of modern technology. There's no electric kettle, so he settles for placing a pot on the stove. Once the cup of tea is ready, Langdon walks back to the living room.

Robby's still stuck to the couch. His gaze is glued to the fire, eyes hazed over but dry. Which is an improvement relative to twenty minutes ago. He waves the tea cup in Robby's vision, and he snaps up at him.

"Chamomile," Langdon explains. Robby nods and places the cup on the coaster beside him. "You still want me here?"

Robby's face contorts before shaking his head. "It's too dangerous to go out—"

"I meant in the house. In this room, with you, do you want me here?"

Robby stares at him like he's asking a trick question. Like if he says whatever is on his mind, he'll be scolded for an incorrect answer.

His eyes start to redden, like answering that is the last thing he wants. A few attempts at words trickle out of his mouth as a stutter. Like the chattering of teeth from marching through a tundra.

"Okay," he whispers, putting an end to Robby's misery.

Langdon grabs a blanket from the rocking chair. Must be from an elderly relative. It's handwoven, each plush square tile adding possibly ten pounds. His legs nearly collapse under the weight of the blanket. Robby raises an eyebrow at him as he hobbles over, plopping the blanket onto Robby's lap.

As he pushes the button to extend the leg rest out of the couch, Robby unfolds the blanket. It must be instinctual that he leaves the left side open for Langdon to slide in. A nice shade of pink dusts Robby's cheeks at the realization.

Once he scootches in, the entire right side of Langdon's body is shocked awake. Robby is a freezer beside him.

“Do you always run this cold?” Langdon asks.

Their arms lay on top of each other. Robby looks down at him. His eyes are frozen at the contact. If Robby’s going to get out of this slump, Langdon will have to pull him up. Throw him a rope to climb up.

Robby’s eyes bug out when Langdon swipes the back of his hand against Robby’s knuckles. He feels the fever of his own body get seeped by Robby’s frigidity.

With Langdon slumped deep into the cushions, Robby hovers over him. A chilled hand feels around for Langdon’s hip. His t-shirt is scrunched up, and he feels the edge of Robby’s cold finger against his belly. He wonders if Robby can feel the butterflies hammering away inside.

“Not always,” Robby whispers, slow and idle.

His hand grows bolder as he palms Langdon’s stomach. The heavy weight is intoxicating. He grabs at Robby’s wrist, his heated hands jumping at the chill spiking up his body.

“Too much?” Robby asks, looking up from Langdon’s stomach.

He shakes his head, no longer trusting his own words. He *has* to clarify though. Needs Robby to understand just what he does to him.

With his grip loose around Robby’s wrist, he drags his hand up the stomach and under his shirt. He hears, only because he’s got his head falling on Robby’s shoulder, the quick breath that Robby takes in.

Robby takes over control, sliding his hand up his sternum. A path of heat is left behind, but Langdon still shivers at its touch. His wrist gets hooked on his collar. He unfurls two fingers against his artery. In silence, they listen to his pulse as it *beats-beats-beats,* blood coursing through his body.

“Your heart is fast.”

God.

“Is that your fancy medical jargon, doctor?”

Robby tilts Langdon’s head in his direction. There’s a playful glint in his eyes. “I could translate that into layman's terms for you.”

Langdon scoffs, but his focus is still stuck on the way Robby licks his lips before he smiles.

“I think this means you like me, Mr. Langdon,” he whispers.

Langdon exhales. Feels his breath whisper against Robby’s beard. “How much do I like you?”

Robby swallows. Two fingers dig deeper into the muscle of his neck, feeling around. He throbs in Robby’s hold.

“A lot.”

His heart is pounding against Robby’s arm, holding him down with one thick forearm, their pulses touching

“Enough to kiss you?”

Their eyes lock, and Robby’s smile grows, small and careful under his beard. The fire paints his profile golden.

“A man can only dream.”

Langdon knows he’s done for. He leans up and pushes their lips together. The facial hair is an immediate and unfamiliar sensation. He adjusts and rolls Robby’s plush bottom lip between his own.

Beside him, Robby curls onto his side. His hand flattens against his sternum. Langdon lets himself be pressed into the cushion. He grabs at the back of Robby’s head.

It’s odd to not find lengthy locks for him to grip, but he could get used to the short strands. His fingers don’t get trapped in any knots as he runs his hand over and over the spiky ends.

He coaxes Robby’s mouth deeper, pushing his head closer. His other arm flies around Robby’s neck. There’s a desperate hunger to be as close as possible.

Robby's hand is wandering. Exploring the short curls on his chest. As his hand moves in comforting circles, his pinkie grazes Langdon’s nipple.

It’s new. It’s electric. It’s…terrifyingly *lewd.*

A heat wave spikes up his spine. He breaks away, panting and starting wide eyed like a ravenous animal. Robby looks back with heavy eyes

and raised eyebrows, like he's melting at the touch.

"What's the matter?"

"You—it…."

Robby's smirk tells him that fucker absolutely knows what he did. Probably did it on purpose too.

"Very eloquent, Mr. Langdon."

Langdon's drowning in his touch, but Robby's basically afloat, already familiar with pleasure points that Langdon himself has never even discovered.

"If this is how you treat all your patients, you need to be fired."

The laugh from Robby is so startling, it rattles his ribcage, stirring up his crazy heart even more. Langdon breathes in, shaky and soaking in Robby's rare joy.

"Only the cute ones that come seeking shelter in my home."

A smile finally breaks across Langdon's face. "You think I'm cute?"

Robby's look is nearly a glare if the amusement weren't so obvious. "You've been crowned the ER Ken of the Pitt."

"Not by you," Langdon whispers, because it's true. Robby's opinion is the only one that has ever mattered.

It's good to know some things truly never change.

"You want me to say it?" He asks. Langdon nods, but Robby clearly isn't done, because he adds, "you want me to tell you how good you look right now?"

His head spins with how quickly the blood starts pooling south. "You need to…*god.*"

"Need to…what? I can't do anything unless you use your words."

Langdon's fingers stop their twirling in Robby's hair. He hadn't even realized he was doing it. His fingers are coarse with the sharp ends of his spiky strands. "You're being a tease."

Robby inches back, mouth goes slack just enough to show the tip of

his tongue. Which, on anyone else, would be a full jaw-drop.

"*I'm* the tease?"

Behind, light from the second floor spills onto the staircase. Langdon peeps over Robby's shoulder, but he can't see much past the enormous muscle spanning across his back.

It physically aches to break away from Robby, but he forces himself to focus. Drags his hand down Robby's neck and into his chest, planting distance between them.

Robby's pained expression hurts even more than the separation before he looks behind him.

"What's going on?" Robby asks.

"I don't know. They're usually pretty heavy sleepers."

They climb the stairs, and Langdon's heart starts humming for a more nauseating reason.

His kids' safety has always been a priority for him, and if he's fucked something up again, some terrible accident—

"Dad, I haveta pee."

Charlotte's standing at the top of the stairs. She's almost at eye level with him, knees still crouched on the steps.

"Oh. Yeah, okay. Come on." He turns around to Robby who points them to the second door on the right.

He ushers Charlotte inside. She reassures him that she's *'got this.'* So, Langdon parks outside, leaning against the hallway. He turns to laugh about their unnecessary panic with Robby only to find no one standing beside him.

Maybe this was the rude awakening Robby was waiting for. Being with a divorced recovering addict with two young children must not be his cup of tea.

Or maybe he realized that latching onto the ever unstable and unreliable Langdon after his own mental collapse in the garage was entirely unsound—ethically and emotionally.

Langdon laughs into his palm, but it sounds pathetic to his own ears.

“I’m done,” Charlotte says from behind the closed door.

“Okay.” The door stays shut. Langdon waits a minute before asking in a shaky voice, “want to come out?”

It’s silent, and the house creaks in place of any actual conversation. It takes another few house groans before Charlotte responds.

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s dark.”

“Dark in where, baby? The bedroom?”

The door swings open. Charlotte’s clutching her hands, twiddling with her fingers. She nods.

He nearly cusses under his breath. It had completely slipped his mind. Her bedroom at his apartment is decked out with dim nightlights and white noise machines.

His mind races with pitiful solutions. There’s nothing here for him to work with. It’s not his home, and he can’t force Robby to help solve yet another one of his problems. Not after Robby’s beginning to regret starting whatever *that* was with him, anyway.

A jumble of noise erupts from the staircase. Langdon pokes his head around the corner and watches Robby bound up the steps with a box full of…something. There’s too many items sticking out to point out any one specific object.

“What are you doing?” Langdon asks, almost accusatory.

It pierces him when Robby stares up with a puzzled look, as if his box of goodies is obvious and Langdon's the fool.

“Jake liked sleeping in the dark.” Robby falls silent, like he’s reached the end of the story. When Langdon doesn’t breathe a word, equally now as baffled, he continues. “I thought it might not be the best environment for a four year old.”

Like that explains his box of gadgets, but the frustration he had placed on Robby immediately falters.

He’s so pissed off with himself that he even thought that low of

Robby. That he'd just leave him that quickly. Drop him as soon as things get even the slightest bit sticky.

He used to think that once. That his complicated bullshit would scare Robby off and drive an eternal wedge between them. Maybe that was the case before, but clearly Robby is proving him wrong

He's here, isn't he?

Charlotte leads him back to the room. The shadows of the furniture play tricks on his eyes. They're daunting, lurking over the bed. Robby speeds ahead of them and pulls a lamp out of the box.

Once it's plugged in, a beam of orange lights the room up. Langdon's about to complain that it's too bright for her, but then Robby pulls out another item from his magic box of lifesaving goodies. A purple scrape drapes across the lamp's shade, painting the room darker with a new shade of magenta.

It seems good enough for Charlotte. She crawls back into the bed and blinks up at him. "Stay?"

"Yeah," Langdon says. "Dad will stay until you fall asleep."

He climbs into the bed behind her. She's a pool of dirty blonde waves on his stomach. Abby used to chastise him for encouraging their behavior at this age. Citing some old research her pediatric nurse mother told her about.

He really can't say no to his angels though, and if it helps them fall back into dreamland, then he would sacrifice his sleep every night until they no longer needed him.

"Thank you," Langdon mouths up to Robby.

Robby's smiling down at them. He plops a stuffed animal next to Charlotte, and she grabs for it without even taking a look. The corners of the comforter are tucked around Langdon's hip. Robby's hands dig into the mattress underneath his thighs, ensuring that they're both kept warm.

Robby leans over them. "Good night, Charlotte."

She opens her eyes up at him. "Night, Mister Robby." Her eyes shut once again, breathing slow and lulled. It settles his own breathing into a steady rhythm.

Robby brushes a hand across the side of Langdon's face. His thumb smoothes out the sharp curve of his cheekbone as he cups him. He just…holds Langdon. Holds him so carefully like some porcelain cup about to chip.

In Robby's molding hand, he's a gentle, precious thing from his box of treasures.

Then, he squeezes, fingers tight around his neck for the shortest of seconds that Langdon thinks his bones will snap. The shaky fire roaring to life in his veins is nothing compared to the adoring look in Robby's eyes. His hand massages at some knot under his neck, and Langdon blinks away his blurry vision.

Robby backs away like it eats at him to let go, and that's all the reassurance Langdon needs right now. He nods his head at nothing as he backs away.

With one last fleeting look, he eases the door shut on his way out, considerate of Charlotte's attempt to sleep. Langdon's face stays engulfed in the heat of Robby's touch long after Charlotte's fallen asleep.

Langdon hadn't meant to fall asleep, but when he wakes up, regret simmers in his core. His back screams at him, a path of fiery pain all the way up his spine.

He looks down, and Charlotte's knocked out, completely zoned out of this world. That's all that matters, but damnit does his back hurt.

Ever so carefully, Langdon pulls himself out from under Charlotte. She shifts around, burying herself more into the pillows before falling still. Langdon tiptoes out of the room and closes the door with a soft click.

He checks his phone, but he's met with a black screen. Useless device can't hold a battery for shit.

From the top of the staircase, he can see the shift in light. It's no longer the middle of the night, but the furniture is still stained completely in blue. Not quite sunrise yet, but almost reaching it.

There was a girl in undergrad he was interested in. Some physics major with an astronomy focus. He had stayed up all night before their next lecture together to cram information about the solar system. How the sky rotates through phases of twilight before the sun actually

rises or sets.

It had worked. They dated for a solid year before she got tired of him either being out all night or studying all day.

Long story short, he knows from his old flirtatious days in undergrad that it's almost sunrise based on the color of the sky beaming inside. Maybe around 6:15 AM.

He creeps downstairs, stiff as cardboard and a hand hovering over the knot in his back. It's a shock to find Robby still in the living room still. The fire is long gone, but he's laid supine on the couch, head tilted towards the mantle.

Langdon creeps closer. He's never seen Robby so off guard before. In the ED, he's always moving from case-to-case, a force to be reckoned with. But here, his eyes shut and stomach taking leisurely breaths, he appears docile.

He can't stop himself from running a light finger across his widow's peak. The hair tickles and is so new in sensation. It's enough to distract him from watching Robby's eyes open.

"Hi," Langdon whispers.

"Mhmm." Robby drags a hand over his face, rubbing sleep all over his face.

"Charlotte's asleep."

"That's good." Robby's voice is raspy, low like it's still dragging out from slumber, that Langdon wants to find a way to keep him balanced in this half-conscious state just to hear it again.

A hand curls around the back of Langdon's thigh. His spine shoots straight as a rough palm kneads the muscle there. Langdon's mouth sputters, more out of a need to preoccupy his mouth before he does something stupid like kiss Robby.

"Thanks again. You kind of saved the night."

"Mmm."

His hand is more persistent now, dragging Langdon closer. Forces Langdon to kneel against the crumb of space on the cushions. The expanse of Robby's chest leaves little room.

“You look comfortable,” Langdon whispers.

Robby finally peels his eyes open to look up at Langdon. That earnest look from hours before is still on his face.

“Join me.”

Robby’s asking with that gruff voice, and Langdon finds he really can’t say ‘no.’ Doesn’t even *want* to say no, so he crawls onto the couch and lays on his side.

He fits his head in the space beside Robby’s head. His arm is jammed between the cushion and his own chest, but the discomfort doesn't bother him. Not when he’s currently focused on his own fascination with seeing the individual hairs of Robby’s beard.

The couch isn't built to fit two grown men. Robby winds his arms around Langdon’s back, keeping his body hoisted to him. There’s no possibility of Langdon falling off with the grip he has on him.

Langdon’s arms flop around into a much more comfortable spot, and his hand circles the tough skin of Robby’s neck. His skin still chills Langdon’s fingers. Maybe he can give Robby some of his warmth.

Both of his hands snake up Langdon’s shirt, clutching at his spine. Like he can sense the pain grinding his bones together beneath the skin. His hands knead up and down. The new warmth in his palms heats up his joints, soothing the ache away.

He doesn’t mean to fall asleep, and he probably shouldn't, but Robby makes it easy. The only reason he wakes back up is Tanner yanking at his arm for breakfast.

Chapter End Notes

was going to post this chapter on friday after my grad school test. instead i'm posting to procrastinate studying because #its never that serious and everything will work out (probably) :P

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Langdon tries to act normal at work. Proceed with his shift like he hadn't almost just begged their boss to touch him two days ago.

He acts as normal as possible. Cracks all his jokes at the right time. Performs all his surgeries with his usual combination of sarcasm and technical precision. Even annoys Dana just for the hell of it.

That ends up being his demise.

"What's with you today?" Dana asks as she reads a report.

When he takes more than a millisecond to respond, she lowers her glasses. Her ability to sense out bullshit has been on par with that of a trained dog. Being the center of her attention can be daunting at times.

Langdon swallows, smile shaky as he asks, "what are you talking about?"

"You've always had a staring problem, but it's terrible today."

He blinks. "I don't have a staring problem."

"Yeah, and I don't take smoke breaks out in the bay," she scoffs.

"Who says I have a staring problem?" Langdon asks. It's that sort of teensy information that gets tossed in the rumor mill that really gets his paranoia stirring.

"Says me." Before Langdon can respond, she adds, "stop worrying. I don't think he's noticed."

"Who?"

"Robby."

Langdon gulps. He smushes his lips together to erase the frown forming. "You think I've been staring at Robby too much?"

"Christ, you're chattier than your own five year old." She looks at him

with thinly veiled disapproval. After he keeps rocking on his toes, Dana rolls her eyes.

“You want to know what I think?” Langdon nods. Dana looks around before leaning in closer. “I think you’ve got a staring problem.”

He throws his hands in the air. “You already said that.”

She grins, and *damnit,* if she didn’t hold the keys to the universe at every given moment, he would have walked away by now.

As they’re talking, Langdon scouts out the hub. Different scrubs pass by him in a blur of colors. Just when he’s about to look away, he watches the only non-uniformed figure exit a trauma room.

Robby lowers his hand to the sanitizer and rubs them together. His own head looks around and spots Langdon. Their eyes lock, and for a few wracking seconds, they stare at each other.

After a moment, he nods his head before walking away, catching up with a new intern.

“Good grief,” Dana grumbles beside him. “Keep it in your pants, will you?”

Langdon jumps, head spinning towards her. He can’t find it in himself to be ashamed of finding Robby attractive at work. It opens up a whole new plethora of ideas. He says *‘ideas’* because he’s not quite ready to call them what they really are, which is *‘fantasies.’*

Still, if he’s trying to stay under the radar, he finds it necessary to ask, “is it that obvious?”

“If I’m sayin’ this to you, it means I’m the only one who's noticed, so relax, will you?”

Her approval sort of means a lot. Takes a weight off chest he hadn’t realized was there.

“Now shoo,” Dana says, handing him some form of caffeination.

Langdon grins, tucking his head down. Takes a big sip before going to grab his next patient.

Maybe Langdon doesn’t fully absorb Dana’s message, because he finds himself more aware of Robby’s presence than ever before.

To be fair, he likes to think it's both of their faults. Landon has accepted his ‘staring problem.’ What he doesn’t take credit for is Robby slipping up at work to the point that warrants staring.

It’s miniscule. Doesn’t really stop the flow of the surgery being performed in the trauma room especially since Mohan and him are doing the majority of physical work. The attending calls the shots, and the senior residents execute the orders.

They can’t do anything when Robby’s staring at the patient’s body on the table. His eyes are hazy, like he’s not really present in this moment and his mind is so far beyond the patient’s critical needs.

Mohan looks up at him with a raised eyebrow. A look that is urging *him* to do something about this. Lest his wraith fall on her shoulders which is fair—she’s always somehow at the short end of his frustrations—but he's not really sure what to do either.

“Robby,” Langdon calls.

His hands are gloved up, bloody, hovering over the patient’s viscera and fluids. He can’t think about that right now when Robby’s just as unresponsive.

“Robby,” he tries again.

This time, Robby shakes to life, jolting like a bolt of electricity struck his veins. He looks around the table, lost, before nodding at no one in particular.

“ECMO Cannulation,” Langdon says. “Yes? No?”

Robby swallows, and his head moves around like a bobble head. Some approximation of a response.

“Yeah, go for it.”

He looks back over at Mohan, who seems just as apprehensive. With a shrug, he hopes his front of tranquility instills some confidence in her.

After the ECMO supports the patient’s circulatory system to recover enough to do the work on its own, Robby flees from the room. Langdon isn’t able to catch up with him for another hour, and when he finds him, he’s peachy and laughing like nothing odd happened.

He waits until Dana leaves to approach.

“Robby,” Langdon calls once again. It’s like chasing someone through a dense forest with no end in sight.

Robby turns around, shoulders hiked up. His eyes do something funny in that they stay hard locked on Langdon. Like he’s a wild animal about to attack Robby at any given moment.

‘You okay?’ almost slips from his mouth. Maybe with anyone else, that would have been the appropriate question.

With Robby, ever the runner of personal conversations about his own wellbeing, he can see how quickly that will go south.

Especially considering how tremendously he handled Robby’s breakdown during Pittfest. He’s still trying to patch that wound.

It’s unclear if Robby ever replays about that moment, compares Langdon to that twisted version of him, but Langdon is all too aware of how selfish and prickly he had been in that moment. It’s a reflection of the worst part of himself—that defensive mechanism that caused him to lash out at Robby.

The factors are all different now. He’s sober and likes who he’s becoming and really likes Robby more than he ever thought possible and he’s got a great therapist and even greater social support. His vision is much clearer now.

With a slow breath, Langdon slides next to him. Robby’s eyes are still massive, but he’s curious. Langdon looks at the computer Robby’s parked at. Bunch of useless words fill the screen. He follows the light to Robby’s face and stares through the big black frames on his face.

It’s weird to spend so much time alone and not be able to recall a moment where they’re both so silent.

It’s…actually really nice.

Langdon can’t let himself get swept under the peace that Robby’s presence brings him. This isn't about him right now.

“Can I come over?”

Robby’s face drops open. Eyes wider than ever—which isn’t by much, but on anyone else, the shock would be nearly cartoonish—and mouth ever so slightly agape.

Langdon rectifies his statement. “Actually, I’m coming over. The game’s on tonight, so I’ll order some pizza. Sorry to disappoint, but it won’t be Angelo’s.”

The lack of control would probably send Langdon spiraling. But, to Robby, it almost seems like a weight off his shoulders. A fickle smile wavers on his lips.

“Who gave you permission to plunder my house?” Robby asks.

He’s testing Langdon. Seeing how much he really means it. He can spot a challenge when it arises, no problem about that.

“I did,” Langdon says with a rush of air. It shouldn't be this exhilarating to take charge, but the rabid look in Robby’s eyes spurs him on. “See you at eight.”

Langdon bolts from the spot he had nearly bore a hole in and lets Robby’s rare smile be his encouragement to keep trying to pull Robby up.

Langdon’s presence in Robby’s townhouse becomes much more common. He starts forgetting the small details of his own apartment. His electricity bill is lower compared to last month’s bill too with how often he’s away, so that’s a major plus for him.

Saving some money isn’t his goal, though. Langdon’s not sure why he’s at Robby’s place so often anyway besides the fact that it’s nicer, stocked with way more food, and most importantly, has Robby.

Robby has never been a hockey fan, but he still lets Langdon come over to have someone watch it with.

Or at least so it’s not just Langdon shouting nonsense at the TV when the ref makes a terrible call despite Robby claiming he’s not passionate about sports. He has the sneaking suspicion Robby *likes* filling his quiet house with his protests and racket.

The Penguins are losing 1 to 4. Even with the most massive comeback of all time, there’s no way they’re shifting the game in their favor.

“I should head out,” Langdon says. Even though he really doesn’t *want* to—because the couch is really comfy and Robby’s a nice line of heat beside him—he’s even more hesitant to overstay his welcome. “You’ll probably start sundowning soon.”

Robby looks at him from over the top of his reading glasses. He pauses, before continuing reading something off his tablet.

“I’m not that much older than you, you know,” Robby comments, unmoving.

Langdon just stares at him, because there’s no universe in the galaxy that wouldn’t be able to see the age difference between them.

He tries not to think about that. About Robby being closer to his parent’s age than most of his colleagues. That Robby’s got twenty years of experience over him.

Again, he’s trying *really* hard not to think about that.

“It’s like—” Langdon checks his phone with a swallow. “Midnight. You’re not going to sleep?”

Robby’s finger taps the edge of his tablet. He’s silent in that way when he’s thinking about what to say.

Then, after a long strategic pause, he admits, “I’ve been told I haven’t been sleeping right.”

“You should probably consult a doctor about that,” Langdon teases. “I know a couple.”

The hockey game’s final whistle call is the only noise. Even Doll’s behaving herself in her dog bed. Then, so quiet that Langdon strains his ears to hear, “I did.”

“You did?” Langdon asks. He admonishes himself for letting his surprise slip in. He licks his lips. “What’d they say?”

One of Robby’s hands picks something up from the side table. He hands Langdon a piece of paper without looking up from the tablet. Langdon raises an eyebrow as he looks from Robby to the paper. It’s a business card with a number. Under the name, he reads—

“A psychologist? Are…you going to go?” Robby shrugs, trying his best to look as detached as possible. “It’d be good to see you take your own advice.”

He looks over at Langdon, and his eyes are narrowed in that way that makes Langdon think he’s about to start crying.

“It’s good advice,” Langdon whispers. His attempt at humor works,

because Robby just sighs instead of looking like he wants to crawl out of his skin.

Langdon rolls his eyes, leaning back into the couch. His own insomnia is one of the last side effects lingering from his withdrawal.

Withdrawal doesn't even last this long. He may just be plagued by his own irksome and worrying thoughts. That combined with the lack of physical therapy at the start of his back injury causes his old pain to reawaken and his symptoms to feed off each other.

Langdon's back feels like a trail of fire ants chewed away at the muscle holding up his spine. Too awake from the pain yet too tired to move or do anything about it. What a cursed fate.

Robby's slumped on the couch beside him, wide awake for an entirely different reason. It's a strange bonding point, considering Langdon's about thirty years too young to be complaining like this.

"You okay?" Robby questions. The tablet is shut off, and he's looking down at him.

"Yeah, just my back. Don't worry about it."

Robby's eyes roam down his body, slow, then back up before he's standing and leaving towards a spare room.

Langdon is left staring at the vacant spot on the couch and listening to any sounds coming from the house. He'd get up and follow him, but his back really *is* killing him.

After a few minutes, Langdon's eyes snap open. His vision swims before Robby appears before him. He moves his hands around, motioning for Langdon to do something. All Langdon can do is follow, and he lays down on the couch. Robby slots himself under Langdon's head.

Sideways, Langdon blinks at the TV. Some truck commercial is playing, but all his attention is single-handedly honed on the warm hand that slides up the back of his shirt.

A finger trails his spine, up and down at a leisurely pace. Like he's taking his time to count all of Langdon's ribs. An anatomical model he would have studied in med school.

The idea of being some project for Robby to study up on is…far too

appealing than it ought to be.

Then, a lukewarm cloth slides up his shirt. Langdon looks over his shoulder to see a thick cord run from his back to the outlet behind the couch.

“Why do you own a heating pad?” Langdon asks. A large hand cards through his hair, pushing his head forward. Langdon flops back onto the couch and onto Robby’s lap. The denim of his jeans is blazing under his cheek.

“Just pick a channel, will you?”

“Who still watches stuff on channels, anymore?” Langdon grumbles, but he accepts the remote being handed to him. It’s all low quality dramas or reruns of game shows. He picks a random trivia series and puts the remote down on the couch.

His eyes bug out when he realizes he effectively put his hand between Robby’s parted legs.

He coughs and tries to readjust his position. Robby keeps him still with a firm hand on his head. His fingers are curling the longer strands. Robby’s touch is light, like if he moves slow enough, Langdon won’t notice he’s there.

Like that was ever a possibility.

They watch the show like that. Well, *Langdon* watches, calling out all the answers (and shouting bullshit on the ones he gets wrong. How was he supposed to know that the sun could fit 1.3 million earths? *Hypothetically,* of course).

From the corner of his vision, Robby’s back on his damn tablet. He’s worse than some of the kids in Tanner’s class. Walls of texts scroll by as Robby reads through whatever medical article has captured his attention.

The heating pad must be set to the highest setting. His back is a fuzzy glow of heat. The line between his skin and the cloth of the heating pad is becoming much harder to distinguish.

Everything blurs into a boiling haze. There’s heat coursing through his body, weighing his body down into an ocean of bliss.

The pads of Robby’s fingers are digging into his head now. He’s

drawing circles into his scalp, and Langdon feels a moan get stuck in his throat. Instead, he forces out an exhale. Tilts his head to plant a kiss to the top of Robby's thighs.

It was only a few weeks ago that they were making out like college kids on this exact couch. This moment feels infinitely more intimate. Robby's cradling his head, *goddamnit.*

With a groan, Langdon turns to lay on his back. The heating pad shifts with him. He looks up at Robby, whose eyes dance between him and the tablet. The sight is pretty ordinary, but he still feels his heart begin to ramp up

Langdon takes a peak at the article from the corner of his eyes. He reads something about *'policy implementation'* and *'interprofessional collaboration'* before he takes a finger and swipes through the entire article in one go.

The tablet gets placed to the side. A second hand falls into Langdon's hair, and his spine arcs at the contact. There's a subtle strength to the tug of his fingers that sends heat thrumming through his veins.

"If you wanted my attention, all you had to do was ask," Robby murmurs.

And, *fucking hell.* He should have just gone home. Everything about this moment is muddying his senses. His brain is melting with Robby's burning touch, seeping into Robby's body.

He needs to change the course of this evening quickly before he makes Robby uncomfortable.

As much as he *wants* this, he knows he can't rush Robby to cave to his own desires. Not when they haven't addressed *that night* from a few weeks ago.

Langdon throws out the first question he can think of.

"How come no one calls you Michael?"

Robby blinks. "What?"

He swallows. Robby's fingers in his hair are plucking the thoughts from his head. "Everyone calls you Robby, but no one calls you Michael."

“My grandmother used to call me that.”

“And?”

“Well, she passed away.”

“I figured as much. I mean, no else calls you Michael. Jake doesn’t even call you that.”

Jake’s still a sour reminder of that day. He sees it in the way Robby’s face scrunched before he quickly shuts down whatever thoughts his name brought forward.

“I don’t know,” Robby says into the quiet.

“Robby Robinavitch,” Langdon mumbles. Robby looks down at him with a concerned look. “It’s not like you were using your first name.”

“Robby Robinavitch.”

“Yeah.”

And, in a rare event of seismic proportions, Robby laughs. Something hearty from the depths of his stomach.

“I’ll make sure to change my ID the next time I’m at work.”

Langdon’s so stunned, he forgets to respond. By the time he remembers he’s an active participant, the moment’s passed. Yet, the immense love that pounds in his heart doesn’t fade.

He’s truly, deeply, in love with Robby, and there is nothing he can do about it.

Somehow, that same night, he had found his way into falling asleep. He wakes up with an ache in his neck. When he looks up, it’s obvious Robby’s going to be in the same boat once he wakes up. His face is propped up by a single hand.

The heating pad has shut off, but there’s still residual warmth clinging to his back. It helps him as he leans up and stretches.

He grunts, and Robby’s eyes snap open like some freakish owl. Langdon startles, and he clutches his beating heart.

“What time’s it?” Robby grumbles.

Heat starts flooding from his back to the rest of his body. His voice after waking up is…something else entirely.

“Uhh. Almost five.”

“Shit.”

Robby drags a hand down his face. His features are heavy, like sleep wore him down. Langdon takes the look in with a breathy sigh, but he snaps himself out of the daze.

Standing up, Langdon softly orders, “let’s go to bed.”

It’s a miracle Robby doesn’t put up a fight about this. “The heating pad….”

“Leave it. I’m okay.”

Langdon’s hand is warm where it holds onto Robby’s. He drags them both up the stairs to the bedroom.

He huffs as he watches Robby plop himself onto the bed. Like his mind is being controlled by some sleep-deprived virus.

It hasn’t taken over him completely. He’s cognizant enough to reach an arm out for Langdon. His heart’s still pounding in his chest as he crawls in beside him.

Robby rolls onto his side and drags Langdon with him. He curls around him, a line of warmth along his back. His very own heating pad with lungs that exhale breathy sighs against his neck.

Langdon isn’t sure when Robby’s influence over the *thump-thump-thump* of his heart will end. He may go into cardiac arrest before he falls asleep next.

Robby curls a hand over his chest like he knows this.

It’s a random Sunday, and Langdon packs the kids into Abby’s car. She’s agreed to pick them up from his apartment during his weekends. It’s just easier than switching out booster seats all the time.

“Can we see Doll next time?” Tanner asks.

Langdon pauses his hand over the buckle in Tanner’s booster seat. The chill from the winter air races down his collar. “Uhmm, we’ll see.”

“I miss her.”

He thinks of Robby pooled on the ground with his kids, eyes shimmering.

“Yeah, I do too, buddy. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye, dad.”

Tanner throws his arms around Langdon’s neck. He presses his lips hard to Tanner’s head. It makes him giggle, and he waves as Langdon shuts the door.

Abby stands behind him, arms crossed. “Who’s Doll?”

“What?”

She glares at him, pulling him away from the car. Far enough that his nosy children can’t overhear. “Are you bringing our kids around some stranger that I don’t know?”

“No—*what*? Why would I do that?”

“*Doll*? What kind of name is that—”

Langdon huffs. “That’s—the dog. The one I got a year ago.”

Abby’s face drops, her eyebrows lifting. “You still have that dog?”

“Robby does.”

“Oh!” Abby’s expression closes. Nods along before and looks away. “You’re going over to your boss’s house?”

He swallows. “Yes.”

“With our kids.”

“Yeah.” Then, “he’s been around them before. At the department parties.”

She sighs, running a hand down her face. “Langdon. I need you to be honest with me. Are you dating him?”

Langdon’s mouth drops. The *audacity*. “Abby, even if I was, how is that your business, huh?”

“If you’re bringing our *kids* to his house—that’s my business.”

He really does not want to discuss whatever he’s got going on with Robby. Langdon’s not even sure what’s happening himself. It’s daunting that he’ll take whatever Robby’ll give him, as long as they’re together.

God, he’s fucked.

“And were you ever going to tell me about Tony?”

“Excuse me? That is none of your business!”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been telling your sister, but she keeps on telling me anyway!”

“I’ll…I’ll talk to Rachel, okay? This isn’t about—”

“Isn’t it?”

They’re running in circles around each other. Abby exhales, hefty and full of things they have yet to talk to each other about.

“I was going to tell you. I just didn’t want to….” She trails off, unsure.

“Rub it in my face?”

“Yeah.”

Langdon sighs, running a hand down his hoodie. Her eyes follow the movement. They’ve both grown shy and uncertain of each other.

“Abby, you deserve someone who can be there for you.” He hesitates, toying with his thoughts. After a moment, in a whisper with all the courage he can muster, he adds, “so do I.”

“I know,” she says, and it’s with such kindness that Langdon starts to believe his own words too.

He stares at her before dropping his eyes to the ground. Even after all this time, he can’t help the compassion she feels for her.

Before, when the pills clouded everything, there was hardly a time he could appreciate her efforts. As a partner, the mother of her children, a person in his life.

It’s strange that they’ve almost grown closer with distance.

“Is he nice?” Langdon asks, rolling his bottom lip.

Abby stares at him with a raised eyebrow. Her car keys jingle in her hand as she fiddles with the metal.

“Uhh. Yeah. Yeah, he’s great. It’s only been a few dates, but we have a lot in common.”

“That’s…that’s really good, Abby.”

“You’re not…?” Abby trails off with a hesitant look. Langdon shakes his head. “You’re being surprisingly cordial about all this.”

Maybe he should be surprised by his own manners. Langdon used to cling to Abby as some kind of life raft. Like a rope he used to climb the social hierarchy. He would get to the top of that mountain and shout about how *‘normal’* he was for having a wife. His ring was to showcase his own pride, not his beautiful relationship.

It dawns on him that maybe their marriage wasn’t as joyful as he tried to make it seem. They had been dating for less than two years when Tanner was born. At the beginning of COVID, no less.

Maybe he only proposed to give their family a fighting chance in a world they could not predict.

Langdon breathes out. Twiddles with the string of his hoodie before rubbing his palms down his jeans. The wind chills the sweat on his hands.

“Did you expect me to be jealous? I think I’ll live.”

Abby sort of just…stares at him. Her eyes are slightly wide, mouth twitching like she’s about to say something but can’t decide what exactly. Her indecision to speak comes out as puffs of breath which cloud the crisp air.

“Is…Robby…?” She asks, face twisting in weird ways.

Horror at what he knows she’s going to say drops in the pit of his stomach. “Please don’t ask if he is treating me right.”

“You just asked me the same question.”

“That’s different.”

“It definitely is not.”

Langdon can't take his eyes off Abby. It's like watching some terrible car crash that keeps piling up.

"It's…it's going good."

Abby's smile is thin. Genuine but cautious. "That's really good. I'm glad. You two always seemed close, so…."

"So?"

She shrugs. "It makes sense, I guess." Then, after a moment, she adds, "I'm just glad it's not someone crazy who's out to bite my head off."

"I wouldn't let them do that," Langdon refutes immediately, frowning.

Abby chuckles, and her laughter is warm in the cold evening air. "What a charmer. You know I'm taken, right?"

It takes him a few seconds to realize she's messing around with him. Most of their relationship swayed between the extremes, that they hardly had time to get to know each other.

They had done things in the reverse order: had a child, got married, then divorced. Now, they're evolving into something akin to coparenting friends.

Like recovery, Langdon realizes that nothing is really linear. There's ups and downs in every aspect of his life. Maybe he can use this second chance to finally connect with his family.

One of them needs to end this before they spend the whole afternoon standing here grinning like idiots.

"Go on. The game's on in five. I'm sure Tanner's dying of boredom in there."

"Yes, yes." Abby looks up at him with a tight smile. "I'll see you later, Frank."

"Yeah."

Abby hops into the car, and Langdon stands at the bottom of the apartment's stairwell, listening to the mechanical parts shifting awake. He watches as the SUV rolls into the distance, and all he is left with is the cold air and heavy thoughts.

Langdon walks into the ER with a sense of dread. It's been steadily building in his stomach since he woke up and looked at himself in the mirror.

To everyone else, it's a fresh Monday morning. Doctor Langdon walks in more tired than usual. Must've had a long weekend. Then, when he turns his head, or stares at the screen, or just generally stays still for more than five seconds, the bruise high on his neck is obvious.

The purpling skin is far back enough that it won't interfere with his ability to interact with patients. They won't see anything incriminating unless they look at Langdon from the side.

And nothing incriminating had even occurred, thank you very much. Because if a patient is nosy enough to ask, he'll tell them the truth.

His son had gotten rowdy when Langdon picked him up during playtime and accidentally smacked him with the sturdy toy in his hand.

That doesn't mean he will tell his coworkers that. They wouldn't believe him if he said as much, anyway.

The comments start early in the day, because it's only seven in the morning. Nothing interesting has happened yet, so they have to start somewhere.

"Nobody wants to see that," Collins grumbles as she joins him beside the nurse's station.

"A small bowel obstruction?" Langdon reads off the board. "No thank you."

She rolls his eyes at him. "You and I both know that is *not* what I'm talking about." Keep it professional."

"You know me. I always keep it classy."

She raises an eyebrow, but she smiles as she says, "mhmmm."

Later, Langdon works a case with Santos. The patient presents with agonal breathing. He's bent over the table, fighting to get an airway. Thinks maybe Santos' intense stare at the back of his head is a genuine interest in the case.

Apparently not, because as they leave the trauma room together, she

gives her two cents.

“Fun weekend?” She asks, aiming (and failing) at casual.

“Wouldn't you like to know,” he says.

“Well, not really, but the rest of the staff keeps asking around. Figured if I’m first to the truth, I get massive points in the rumor mill.”

Langdon turns around to give her a flat look. She shrugs, unashamed, and stares back with some new reservoir of patience. It’s terrifying how much they sound alike. Langdon recalls saying the same shit years ago.

Her unanswered question only stirs up more drama despite the influx of patients as the day passes. It keeps the day airy and relaxed, because between the gore and frustration, they have to have a little fun. Langdon’s having a ball keeping people on their toes about this.

Langdon moves with the EMTs into the unoccupied trauma room. They spout the important information and split ways. Langdon can already see the problem staring back at him. It’s a penetrating cardiac injury from a stab wound.

“What do we have?” Robby shouts above the chaos.

“External injury to the chest. Systolic pressure 85.”

Behind him, Robby is a steady presence. A line of unyielding strength and command. It makes him bolder, waves of confidence overriding any other thoughts or emotions.

“He’s going to need a thoracotomy.”

“Better let surgery know,” Robby comments.

“Already on it,” a voice calls from the door. Garcia marches in, gloving up.

“Aren’t you quick today,” Langdon comments.

“Just because you’re slow doesn't mean the rest of us are.”

He backs away as Garcia squeezes past him to assess the patient. His back bumps into a solid block. Langdon looks up, expecting to see the wall, but is instead met with Robby’s intense stare and unyielding body.

In a second, Robby's gone from behind him, and Langdon's legs nearly quiver with the lost stability.

"Are you going to hover behind me all day?" Garcia asks over her shoulder.

"I wouldn't subject myself to that," Langdon cackles.

"Then leave this to me," she grumbles.

He throws his hands up and makes his way towards the exit. As he walks backwards, watching the incoming surgical team and nurses prep him for surgery, Garcia looks up with a smirk.

"Cute hickey."

The roar of heat to his face is obvious, to him at least. He can't allow her the last word no matter the humiliation.

"At least I'm getting some."

"I feel sorry for that poor *sucker*."

Langdon grins as he walks out. Feels his hip bump into the door, and he pushes to let himself out. The rush of noise comes back loud and comforting. Always a rush of stimuli.

"Doctor Langdon."

Only one voice could stand out so prominently in the busy rush of the ER. Langdon searches around to find wherever Robby's voice came from. After a second, he spots him standing near the ambulance bay entrance.

Langdon trots over, hands clenched at the ends of his stethoscope. "What's up, boss?"

"Got a second?" Robby asks.

His tone is flippant, but he knows it's not a question. So, as commanded, he follows Robby into the stairwell. The noisy ruckus softens to a whisper as the door shuts behind Langdon.

Robby turns around, and his eyes are strange. Narrowed and intense as they look him up and down. Langdon finds himself holding still. Doesn't even let himself breathe in.

“The thoracotomy go well?”

Langdon raises an eyebrow. Looks over his shoulder to the trauma room they were both just standing in.

“Uhh, yeah. Surgey’s taking over.”

Robby nods. “Good.”

There’s a quiet hum in the vacant area. Like the distant hum of buzzing electricity.

“Seems like you had an eventful weekend,” Robby eventually mutters.

There’s a tension in his voice that pulls at Langdon’s strings. Some kind of innate response to Robby’s distress that plucks at the wires of his own anxiety.

Langdon slaps a hand over the bruise. His fingers clamp tight together behind his ear. Heat builds in the space there, and his wild pulse races under his palm.

“It’s not like that.”

“No?”

“I didn’t mean for—”

“Didn’t mean to show up to your place of work with a love bite?”

“That’s not what it is.”

“You seeing someone I don't know about?”

And in a blink, the rapid back-and-forth is cut. Like a watermelon falling out of the sky and landing with a splat on the ground. Langdon scrambles to put the shattered parts back into one cohesive piece.

“No. I mean, not exactly—”

Fuck.

Because, truly, Langdon can’t answer this without spilling his guts. He isn’t dating anyone, because he finds himself day and night fantasizing and dreaming and hoping and begging for a life with Robby. There’s no time or room to consider anyone else.

And yet, he didn't think he'd be telling Robby any of this in the middle of the ER stairwell. Actually, he was dreading ever telling this.

Just because they've slept over at Robby's place a couple of nights to ease the pains of insomnia, and kissed a few times, and Robby's helped take care of his children, and Langdon's let him into every aspect of his life, and everything is just so much better with Robby—

It doesn't mean Robby feels the same about him. Doesn't mean Robby's at all serious about this…*thing* between them that's taken over Langdon's life.

"What was the question?" Langdon hears himself snivel.

Wordlessly, Robby crosses his arms. His head juts down, demeaning and cruel. The question snaps to mind again, and Langdon sighs.

There's no point dwelling on how pathetic he is for this. He'll tell Robby his little one-sided crush, Robby will pity him, keep dragging him along like a dog on a leash. They'll go back to normal.

"I wouldn't do that to you," Langdon says, slipping his hand off his neck.

Robby rubs at his own neck. His deep exhale echoes in the stairwell. "What happened?"

"Tanner whacked me in the neck with a toy."

There's a hushed lull followed by the boister of Robby's cackle. A large palm, slowly, so slowly like he's going to scare Langdon off, lands on his neck. It's freezing, sending a spike of chill up his back. His back curves with the touch.

Robby's thumb brushes over the spot once. Then again, and again, until Langdon feels his neck go numb.

"That's a lot funnier than what I thought."

Water shines his vision, but Langdon sees a faint smile tug at the edge of his mouth. He feels himself do the same.

"What did you think happened?"

"Thought you cheated on me."

Langdon's heart catches in that. His rhythm trips, and he clutches his

fists.

“Robby,” Langdon says slowly. “We aren’t…together.”

Robby looks lost. His eyes are directed at Langdon, but he doesn't feel Robby there.

“Yeah,” he whispers, that sad smile still pressed on his face.

Langdon thinks he must have really lost his mind and dreamed up the hope he hears in that single word.

It’s late enough in the day that he doesn’t need shades, but the lingering heat from the sunlight keeps him warm. Langdon’s swinging in McKay’s hammock—*his* hammock if he wants to get technical about it. He did come over ass early one day to help install it for her.

The backyard door creaks open and shut. McKay’s got two bottles in her hand. “Move over.”

“I don't think this thing fits two people.”

“Yeah, it does. Me and Harrison fit.”

“Harrison’s like half my size.”

“Not at the rate he’s growing.”

“Still doesn’t refute my point.”

“Are you going to let me in my own hammock or are you just going to be a dick?”

Langdon shuffles over the best he can. They nearly capsize, the hammock tilting over with McKay pushing down on the other side. Eventually, she settles across from him, propping her ankles on his shoulder. His feet get trapped behind her back as she lays down.

“Here,” she says, passing a bottle to him.

“Thanks.” The green glass makes him immediately think of soju, but he knows she doesn’t drink. He opens his hand and reads the label. “Ginger ale again? Are we fifty?”

“It’s good for you.”

“This barely has any real ginger.”

“Fine. It tastes good.”

“Now you’re just lying. Thought we were friends?”

“You’re so prissy. Just take a fucking sip.”

Langdon breaks out into a grin, and they each take a large swig. The incoming night brings a cool air that feels nice on his face. A gentler version of the ice baths he used to take at five in the morning.

The taste of the ginger ale brings him back a few months to the one year anniversary of his sobriety.

With Robby still absent and furious on sabbatical, Abby tumbling through her own feelings about Langdon and keeping the children away, and his parents ever present inconsolable eyes (not disappointed—never—just hurt that their son is going through a pain they can’t understand), Langdon had wanted to go to work and pretend like the date wasn't etched into his head. Like the countdown notification on his phone meant jack shit.

McKay didn’t let him. Or rather, she allowed him his space to let the day pass in silence, but her obvious feelings of celebration pounded in his own heart. It was out of pity for her, he keeps convincing himself, that they had sat on her couch and ordered takeout to binge watch his favorite movies.

He thinks maybe that moment was pivotal to letting her in. She’s sort of stuck with him for the rest of their lives now.

“Abby’s seeing someone,” Langdon says to the sky.

McKay groans. “Please tell me that whoever it is, they’re not like that wannabe step-mom Chad’s seeing.”

He snorts. “Nah. Haven’t seen any competitors with a ‘dad who stepped up’ t-shirt. Yet.”

“Good. So, who is it? Meet him yet?”

“Some dude named Tony. I don’t know much about him—only what my sister-in-law keeps telling me. I’m about one text away from blocking her.”

“As much as I’m advocating for you to throw this woman off the face

of the planet, what if something happens to your kids, and they need to get in touch with you?"

Langdon thinks on that and stuffs his phone back into his pocket. "Never mind then."

"Have you told her about Robby yet?"

There's not anything to say about that part, or at least, anything he wants to say, so Langdon turns his head away.

"Frankie, I'm not going to tell you what to do, but she should probably know—"

"She figured it out herself," Langdon grumbles.

"That doesn't really surprise me."

"Well, she didn't seem very surprised either."

"It's sort of obvious when you think about it." McKay snickers. "And cliché"

"Cliché?"

"Falling for your boss."

Langdon opens his mouth to defend himself, because this is very much a two way street. If anything, Robby's fallen harder for him if that look on his face the other day means anything, thank you very much, and *oh my god,*

"I'm in love with my boss," Langdon blabs out. He covers his face, groans muffled behind his hands.

How could this be his fucking life.

"He's really good with the kids, Cass," Langdon confesses out of nowhere, because he needs to tell *someone* about these revelations.

It's mind-blowing he hasn't realized this before.

"Holy shit," McKay laughs.

"And he's so nice—and awesome. He can be such an asshole, but so am I, and it's always a good time when I get to be an asshole with him. Like I don't have to hold back, and we can be ourselves. And

every time he's looking at me, it's like…something weird in his big eyes. Is that normal? It doesn't feel normal. *I* don't feel normal."

"You just gave me a ton of reasons why you like him. That sounds normal to me."

Langdon groans louder. Falls back into the hammock, and they rock side-to-side for a while before McKay speaks up.

"Now all you have left to do is make the moves."

"The moves? Like sex?"

"Well, maybe start with a date first, but that too."

"Sex. With Robby."

"You know—sex. Like the thing that wound up giving you two kids?"

Langdon's eyes widen. "I don't know if sex is something either of us want."

McKay raises an eyebrow at him. "You just talked about how great he is and how twinkly his eyes are when he looks at you."

"That doesn't mean it's sexual," Langdon mumbles. A last ditch effort to save the shreds of his dignity, but it's a hollow defense.

"No, but this is the fifth time you've told me that this month. It gets to a point, dude."

"I've never had sex with a dude, Cass."

McKay shrugs. "It's never too late to try. Could be a good time. I know it is."

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, thanks for that visual."

"You're welcome."

McKay's giving him space, because they both know he's turning over what to say next. He's been spending too much time around her if they're able to predict each other like this.

"Do you think Robby's into guys?" He whispers. It feels dangerous even putting that idea into the air.

McKay hums. She puts a finger and thumb to her chin. “I haven’t heard anything definitive, but he’s also a pretty private person.”

“Incredible detective work,” Langdon grumbles.

She glares at him. “You’re in the same gossip circles as me, man. Whatever you know, I know. Well, apparently besides how Robby’s eyes sparkle when he looks at you.”

Langdon hunches into himself, hiding his face behind his hands. “Did I actually just say that?”

Her laugh is loud, echoing in the quiet of the neighborhood. “You did! You want my input?”

Langdon nods into his hands. McKay knocks her foot into his head, nudging him to look up. He takes a deep breath before leaning back into the hammock.

“I think if even *you* of all people are seeing this, that means Robby’s definitely got some sort of feelings for you.”

“Yeah, but what *kind*?”

“I don’t know! That’s something you have to talk to him about! Shit, you both suck at communication.”

“You think?”

She takes a sip of the ginger ale. “You’ll feel a lot better once you know if you and Robby are on the same page.”

“Yeah….”

“Probably,” she adds, smirking.

Langdon rocks his leg into her stomach, tilting the hammock. She grumbles, shoving her foot in his face. He leans away and yanks her ankle. She flails.

In a blink, the fabric beneath flips upside down, and they’re both staring at the bottom of the hammock from the ground. Langdon’s laugh is the first thing to break the silence.

A knock on Langdon’s door startles him out of his nap. His world tilts as he rolls off the couch. The neighbors can be rowdy people, but they

generally keep to themselves. He can't imagine who else would be knocking at his door at nearly 11:00 PM.

Through the peep hole, he sees Abbot snooping right back at him. His left eye is enormous in the fisheye lens. He jumps at the closeness.

"C'mon, Langdon. Open up. I hear you scuttling around in there."

Langdon unlatches the lock and opens the door. "Do I want to ask how you know where I live?"

"Probably not. A man's got to have his secrets."

"Right," Langdon grumbles. He rubs a palm in his eye. It's too late in the day for this. "What did you want?"

Abbot doesn't grin. His face is always entirely too serious, but there's a gleam in his eyes. It's a tiny thing, but sharp and evil at the corners like the Cheshire Cat. Smiling like he knows something Langdon doesn't.

"I've got a present for you," Abbot announces.

Langdon can't even feel any shock. Abbot's always been a character, and the fact he's standing outside his door like some kind of ominous Christmas Caroler is something he could only imagine in a dream.

So, when Abbot physically hands him a limp Robby, Langdon accepts the man with open arms and barely a raised eyebrow.

"Happy birthday or whatever. I've got a shift to work."

As Abbot walks away, Langdon's brain finally catches up with reality. He fumbles to keep Robby standing, but Robby seems to have that covered. His arms are tight around Langdon's shoulders. He's being clenched with such a sturdy hold, the bones in his back pop.

"Wait! What's wrong with him?" Langdon shouts outside.

Abbot pauses at the top of the stairs. "I'm afraid there's not enough time in the universe to go through Robby's laundry list of issues."

He barely keeps his irritation below a simmer. "I meant right now."

"Look at him. He's drunk as all hell, man. We were catching up over some drinks, and he started pounding 'em back. Now, he's your problem."

Langdon swallows. Robby sways in his hold, mouth breathing hot air against his neck. It's exhilarating. "And why is he my problem?"

Abbot levels him with a stare. "I'm not going to undermine your intelligence by stating the obvious. We both know why he's here. Have a ball."

And with that, Abbot bounds down the stairs and out of sight. Langdon stares at the spot he was standing in for a good minute.

"Close the door," Robby mumbles into his neck. "You're lettin'...heat out."

Langdon scoffs. Ever the old man. He uses his foot to bring the door shut and one hand to lock the chain back into place.

He moves Robby against the door, holding him with a tight grip to his forearms. Robby's head lags behind, rolling around before looking up at him with long lashes.

God, he's plastered.

Robby looks at him, finally seeing that Langdon's standing right in front of him. A red flush paints his face, and his smile highlights the growing blush to his cheekbones.

"Hey, baby," Robby drawls.

Fuck, Langdon thinks. He's even more screwed than Robby.

"Looks like someone had a little too much fun, huh?" Langdon asks.

Robby nods his head with that earnest innocence only drunk people can achieve. He's never seen Robby with his walls so thoroughly—well, not even knocked down. Completely eviscerated.

Then, Robby's gaze drags around the room like he's physically running a finger across the furniture. "So…this is where you live."

"You'd seen it before if you actually visited."

Langdon bites down on his tongue. That was *not* an argument he meant to start now, even if it was becoming increasingly evident that Robby was always inviting Langdon to his house and never going out of his way to visit Langdon's shit apartment.

"It's easier at my house," he mumbles.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

It takes genuine effort for Robby to push himself off the door. He looks everywhere beside Langdon.

“This place is so…you. It’s too much.”

“My divorce dad apartment is too much for you?” Langdon scoffs.

Robby shakes his head in a sweeping side-to-side motion that would make Langdon nauseous. “Yer so much. Like staring—at the sun. I’m scared of gettin’ burned.”

His words are so sluggish, it takes him a solid minute just to say anything. Yet, Langdon’s heart doesn’t seem to care. It’s shaking in its ribcage.

“What’s that got to do with my house?”

“I was scared…I’d wan’ you even more. If I saw yer house. Like—see inside you.”

“And?”

Robby nods. He’s swinging his head up and down, eyes growing redder and redder.

Langdon swears under his breath. He curls his arms in the air, aiming for a hug, before he thinks better of it.

“Okay. You have me. You know that?”

It must have been the wrong thing to say, because Robby’s shielding his eyes now. There’s a tiny whimper that escapes his lips, and Langdon can’t take it anymore. He brings Robby into his arms. They’re the same height, nearly, but Robby’s curled into him like some wounded creature.

Robby says in a single exhale, laughter and disbelief curling in his words, “you still want me after all this.”

Langdon doesn’t remember moving, but he’s rocking them both in place. “You still want me. Isn’t that impressive enough?”

Robby backs away. Stares at Langdon, eyes big and teary. “You’re great, Langdon. Everythin’ you’ve done’s been so…I’m so prouda you. I wish I weren’t sayin’ like this, but I’m so, so proud of you, and it’s

only made me want you more."

His mouth is dry, and any response he has gets soaked up like the last bit of moisture left. It's all the right words, but….

"Tell me when you're sober?" Langdon pleads.

Robby nods. "I'd tell you every mornin' if you let me."

"*Jesus*," Langdon mutters. A matching flush heats to his face.

"You got a blush," Robby cheers.

Both his hands cup Langdon's jaw, so careful and delicate. He moves Langdon's head from side to side very slowly.

"I wanna make you blush all the time."

"Yeah," Langdon whispers, because what the fuck is he supposed to say to that? "Let's sit down."

"What'ver you want, baby."

His blush blooms in full force, and it reaches the tips of his ears. Robby laughs, tracing a warm finger along the shell of his ear. Langdon grabs him by the forearms again, plopping him on the center cushion.

Standing over him, Langdon is about to open his mouth to speak, maybe offer food or a movie.

Except, Robby's quicker and moves both hands onto his hip. His thumbs curl into the beltloops of his jeans. The eyes that look back up at him are nothing but impish.

"We doin' it like this?" Robby coos.

Langdon's heart sputters alive. A trail of goosebumps spike up his back as most of his blood travels *down*, because now he has images of what exactly *'like this'* means.

If he had any doubts about any sexual chemistry between them, they've all been effectively burned to ashes.

"We aren't doing it any which way till you are good and sober."

"I can be *very* good," Robby says, tongue darting out of his mouth.

“Okay!” Langdon yelps out.

He pushes Robby back with two palms against his shoulders. Robby flops back into the cushions like a balloon being pulled around in the wind. Langdon exhales and sees how his breath tickles Robby’s beard.

It’s mesmerizing, and he forgets he’s actually in the middle of saying something. Robby’s limbs flop around as he makes himself comfortable.

“You need to sober up,” Langdon declares. “For the both of us.”

“You *are* sober,” Robby says with a frown.

“Yes, I am. But you’re flirting with me—”

“You don' like it?”

And Robby’s pout is so serious, it circles back around to being endearing. He’s so charming in his honesty, and Langdon’s always known he’s been a sucker for how he wears his heart on his sleeve.

Langdon picks his words carefully. He doesn’t want to topple Robby any which way and cause him to spiral.

“You can flirt with me in the morning.”

“Sounds good.”

Langdon starts drawing up a plan in his head. Food won’t do him any good. Only time will be able to truly sober him up. Could grab something from the fridge to fill him up on electrolytes.

“Hey, Frank.”

“Yeah?”

“Can we go to bed?”

He can’t hold back the laugh even as he covers his mouth. His hand drags down.

“Sure, man. C’mon.”

It takes a few minutes to pull Robby up. Even though they’re the same height, Robby’s got some mass over him. Langdon’s build is sleek compared to the expansive muscles covering Robby’s body. It’s

mouthwatering to have his thick arm wrapped around his neck.

Even if it's just to help Robby's drunk ass from falling in the hallway.

They make it to Langdon's room without incident. He helps Robby take off his shoes and sweater. None of his shirts will fit—and now is not the time to watch Robby squeeze his muscles into a tight shirt—but maybe his old sweatpants will work.

Robby seems to be on the same page, because he's already unbuttoning his pants. Langdon speeds up his pajama hunt and tosses a pair of sweatpants at Robby.

"Put these on," Langdon says with his back to Robby. "I'll—uhhm. I'll be right back."

He darts out of the room, and Robby's groan echoes into the hallway. His pounding heart follows him all the way to the fridge, and he grabs the first Gatorade he sees. He grabs two extra water bottles and a trash can just to be safe.

As he pads back to his room, he takes a moment to breathe. It's the first bit of air he thinks he's felt since Robby's arrival. He must be the first person in the whole world to go without oxygen for ten whole minutes.

And all he has to report? A dizzy head, a hammering heart, and a lot of blood stirring down below.

He leans against the wall. Practices his breathing techniques as an extra precaution. After a final moment, he steps back into his bedroom.

Robby's got the right idea, laid flat on the bed and eyes shut. Just extremely poor execution.

His sweater's somewhere on the bed, arm still through one of the sleeves. The t-shirt he's wearing underneath is riding up to reveal the hair of his stomach. It curls down and down to the band of his boxers that's hiding just above the sweatpants he managed to pull on.

A for effort, he supposes. It's impressive, considering Robby now looks half a second away from passing out.

"Robby."

“Hmmm.”

“Sit up. You need to drink this.”

Robby takes the Gatorade without question. He struggles with the cap before twisting the correct way and chugs. He only slows down once Langdon reminds him to. The trash can gets placed on the far side of the bed where the majority of Robby’s body is laying.

Langdon decides now may be a good time to change into his own pajamas. He yanks a new sleeping shirt from the closet, because usually, he doesn’t bother. But, tonight, he has a guest, so he’ll be modest.

As he pulls off his shirt, he feels the weight of eyes bearing into his back. He looks over his shoulder to find Robby sizing him up. Heat climbs up his spine, and he clears his throat in hopes to wipe the blush on his face.

“Stop staring at me,” Langdon orders.

“Okay,” Robby says.

Langdon pulls on the old college t-shirt he picked. There’s a hole near the bottom hem he toys with for a second before looking back. Robby’s still got his eyes on him.

“What did I just say?” Langdon scoffs.

“I’m not lookin’ at you. ‘m lookin’ at the door.”

The door conveniently placed right behind him. Right. Langdon rolls his eyes, but if Robby’s shitty jokes get a laugh out of him…so what? No one’s around to tell.

“Get into the bed,” Langdon says, waving a hand.

Robby pulls the sheets back and stuffs himself in like he’s been here a million times before. “Will you stay?”

He pauses at the edge of the comforter.

“Do you want me to?”

Robby’s nod is instant, but his mouth is much slower to follow. He speaks slowly, sounding out each careful word. “I’m not that intoxicated to…not know what I want. Just don’t…leave?”

Langdon's heart, like an overworked clock, stops ticking and falters. Such a heavy statement. It would be cruel to turn him away, and he's never been good at keeping away from him, anyway. No reason to start now.

"Okay," he whispers. "Just to sleep."

"Yeah," Robby agrees in a little whisper.

Langdon flicks off the lights. The darkness drowns them, and it's surprising to see a shadow in his bed. He places the extra bottle on the nightstand and crawls into bed beside Robby.

Robby's eyes are glued onto him, like an animal trying to calculate Langdon's next move. Judging to see if Langdon is a threat to his survival.

Langdon lays flat on his back. "Are you…going to go to sleep?"

Without a sound, Robby lays flat on his stomach. His arms circle under the pillow, and he props his head to face Langdon.

"Good night, Robby." It's quiet, unsettling, even. Langdon lets slip, "I'm glad you're here."

And it's worth it to see Robby's smile grow in the dark. Even if he shifts to hide it in the pillow.

When Langdon wakes up, panic submerges him as he tries to move. A claustrophobic terror astounds him as wriggles around without any luck. Then, he opens his eyes to see the reason.

Robby's arm is locked around his torso. Further down, he has Langdon's legs captured with one single leg weighing both of them down. Half of his stomach is lying on Langdon's own.

The panic resides, and instead what fills its place is exhilaration. *Finally* waking up beside Robby isn't something he thought he'd once celebrate, but now, he's over the goddamn moon.

He's not sure what his next move should be. Anticipation is building in his heart. Unfortunately, his body can't seem to differentiate talking to Robby from running a marathon.

Just as he's about to come to some semblance of a plan, Robby wrecks it all. His head digs into Langdon's neck. The grumble that comes out

of him is so low and resounding, Langdon feels his face heat up.

“Robby?” Langdon whispers, hurried.

Robby comes to with a groan. It must be one gnarly hangover to be weighing him down like this.

Ordinally, Langdon would let him off easy. Tease him a little and move on. Except, he’s laying in Langdon’s bed, and that feels significant enough to push past whatever fog is clouding Robby’s head and talk about it.

“Robby,” Langdon tries again. He shakes the shoulder on top of him.

Robby pops open his eyes. They nearly bug out of his head. He looks over at Langdon like it’s a foreign concept for him to be in his own *goddamn bed*, thank you.

A large hand sweeps down Robby’s face. He rolls onto his back, groaning. They sit there for a minute and soak in the silence. Langdon swallows. It’s loud in the room, and Robby’s reaction is freaking him out.

“Did you mean everything you said last night?” Langdon sputters. "About wanting me?”

“I guess I owe you some answers.”

“You guess?”

Robby sighs. He leans up, laying his back flat against the backboard. He fiddles with the cover. They spend some time looking at different parts of the room. Langdon wishes he could crawl inside of Robby's chest and listen to what's making him hesitate.

“I thought I was scared of you. Turns out, I was just…scared of how much I felt about you.”

He takes a second to pause and really breathe. “I’m tired of being afraid. I…I don’t want these *feelings* to be something to be scared of. They’re so big, I didn’t know what to do with them. I was so confused that I just got angry and distant when I really should have just been telling you instead.”

“I’m right here,” Langdon whispers. “If you want to tell me.”

“I do.”

Robby peers down at Langdon. It's uneven and the look in his eyes sends his heart racing. He scoots up so they're sitting side-by-side. Robby stares ahead, hands clenching his duvet.

"There's always been something I've…admired about you. The way you can work a room and how everything comes so easily. Your wit and your charm…how everyone's eyes are on you and always going above and beyond. But now, I'm seeing who you really are. Besides all that. You've really grown into yourself, and that's…it means a lot to me. To get to see that."

Langdon feels the words trickle out of his brain. It's…everything he's ever hoped to hear from Robby. It stuns him into silence.

"I won't overwhelm you with this, but I think you should know. I wanted you to know, but don't say 'yes' if you don't want to."

He swallows. "Say 'yes' to what?"

Robby can barely look at him. His eyes swing all over the place before he glances at Langdon's torso. Creeps his gaze up to Langdon's eyes before saying, "if we could…see where this goes."

"Like…a relationship?" Langdon asks. Clarifies, because he really needs to make sure he's not jumping ahead of Robby on this.

"If you want."

"You and I?"

Now, Robby raises an eyebrow. "I don't see who else I'd be talking to."

"You want to…what? Date me?"

Robby starts to curl away. "If you don't want to—"

Before Robby even dares to finish that sentence, Langdon pounces. Curls two hands around his biceps and kisses him like he's been dreaming of doing for months now. Holds him like letting go would mean the end of the world.

Robby's posture is almost shy. Cautious. Shielding his vitals away from harm. But, as Langdon keeps pressing kisses into Robby's face, he unfurls. Lets himself be doted on and even paws at Langdon's arms.

"Okay," Robby whispers, laughter hidden underneath. "Okay."

“I *wish* you would burden me,” Langdon states. “You aren’t a burden, but I want you to tell me everything that makes you think that.”

“The good, the bad, and the ugly?” Robby asks. His smile quivers.

“You’re showing your age with that movie reference, but yeah, Robby. Everything.”

“It’s Clint Eastwood,” Robby mutters. Like he’d be able to name the director of any movie released this century.

Langdon doesn't know what to say, but he realizes now that he doesn't have to have something to say. Nothing witty or logical or something that adds to the conversation. He can just kiss Robby until neither of them have the breath to speak.

He pulls Robby in by the grip on his shirt. Rolls his smooth bottom lip in with his own. Robby curls a hand around his neck. He feels his heartbeat throb under Robby’s palm.

“I didn’t mean to get shitfaced,” Robby adds, like he had forgotten how they ended up here.

Langdon knows for a solid fact Robby remembers everything. He wouldn't be acting so reserved if he had forgotten.

“Really? You just happened to slip and land underneath a beer keg or something?”

Robby doesn’t roll his eyes. That’s juvenile. But the glare he gives Langdon is just as childish.

“I wanted to call and tell you all this, but I….” Robby looks away, toying with his words. “Figured I’d work up the courage after one more drink.”

“And then the drinks kept coming,” Langdon fills in.

“Yeah.”

Langdon swallows. “Well, you don’t have to get drunk to tell me any of that. Just come over—or call me.”

“Okay.” Robby whispers. He winces, drawing a hand down his face.

“Headache?” Langdon asks. When Robby nods, he adds, “there’s some ibuprofen in the drawer.”

He shuts his eyes as he listens to Robby rummage through the bedside drawer. Lets the moment soak into his skin as he lays back down. The blinds allow the sun to keep them warm, rays of orange laying on his stomach. The moment is something out of a dream.

A heavy weight gets set on his chest. Langdon opens his eyes. An old bottle of lube stares back at him.

“This doesn’t look like the ibuprofen,” Langdon says instead of *‘why the fuck did you take out the thing I use to jack off?’*

“Just good to know you have this here.”

His face sets alight with a roaring blush. Throw the damn thing in his own side table before turning back to Robby. His satisfied smirk says that he doesn't regret a thing.

“By the way, did you know you get flirty when you’re drunk?” Langdon teases.

It’s Robby’s turn to be bashful. A bright red flares across his cheeks. It expands like wildfire all the way to the tips of his ears.

“So, you did know.”

“I didn't think I’d…you just looked….”

“I looked like….what? In my ratty t-shirt and stained jeans?”

Langdon raises his eyebrows. He’s about to reach over for his phone and call for an ambulance, because it almost seems like Robby’s having a stroke. It takes a few seconds for him to realize what it actually is.

“Oh my god, you’re blushing,” Langdon says.

Robby is downright *flustered*. He never thought Robby even had the personality for that sort of sheepish trait. It’s showing itself as Robby rubs a hand in his neck.

“How explicit did I get, exactly?”

He really needs to draw this out, because, *fuck,* is it just too good. Not only to be the sole focus of Robby’s attention, but because it’s such a rare occurrence to see him endearingly timid like this.

“What do you remember?” Langdon asks.

Robby shakes his head. “I can’t tell the difference between what I said and thought.”

Langdon grins.

A better man would fill Robby in on what he may or may not have said. Langdon could be kind, but it’s a lot more fun keeping him hanging like this.

Never mind the fact that Langdon wouldn’t be able to get the words out himself.

Chapter End Notes

> happy halloween to everyone who celebrates :P have a new chapter earlier than i would have normally published!
>
> also thank you for all the good luck wishes on my test earlier this week! it was terrible but nothing that i wasn't expecting LOL. time to halloweekend party!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Last Christmas was spent in an outpatient rehab facility. Miserable, infuriated and confused with Robby and hating himself for not understanding.

So, while he didn't have high hopes for Christmas this year, Langdon knew it would certainly be better than last year.

He's confused when the invitation from Abby comes two days before. It's easier to figure this out over a phone call, so he dials her number and waits.

"Yeah?" Abby says.

"You invited me to your family's Christmas."

Neither Abby nor Langdon's families are religious. But it's a nice excuse to get together, and his children certainly don't mind a reason to be showered in free gifts.

"The kids want to see you," she says. There's some shuffling, like she's moving the phone to the other shoulder. "I'm not bringing Tony, but if you want to bring Robby, go ahead."

"Abby, you don't think this is a little…weird?"

"What? That you're my ex?"

"Well, yeah?"

She sighs, and it comes through with a crinkle. "You're not really my ex. You're the father of my kids. It's not like there's tension between us, and if the kids both want you there, what am I supposed to say?"

"You could say no," Langdon pushes. Just to see if she changes her mind, because he doesn't want to show up just to be kicked out. He truthfully wants nothing more than to spend more time with his kids.

"If you don't want to, you don't have to go. Tanner and Charlotte may

not like you for a while, though."

Langdon's silent for a few seconds. Lets the toxic thought of his children's despise rot in his chest before he throws away the thought entirely.

"Your parents won't mind?"

"You know my dad. He always thought it was soooo great he finally had a son-in-law after three daughters. And my mom's gotten over it after you stepped up."

"And Uncle Garrett?"

Abby scoffs. "Fuck Uncle Garrett. He's definitely not invited this year."

Langdon swallows. Wets his mouth before saying, "well, guess I have to go now, don't I."

"Dinner's at six. Bring your parents too."

It's been…way too long since he's spent the holidays with any family. His pride at being the well-known family man, the father who had people depending on him, took a hit when he started spending every holiday alone—or working at the ER.

After he realized the bigger picture that was his addiction putting distance between him and his family, he got used to the loneliness. Even took comfort in it.

So, receiving that invitation from Abby was like a key to the pearly gates. His first step back into the warmth of the people he loved to support the most.

Langdon tries not to show his eagerness, but he shows up three hours before dinner even begins to start cooking. Tanner and Charlotte running up to him once he walks in and nearly sobbing into his chest like he's actually Santa Claus makes it all worth it.

It's not as awkward as he had thought it would be. Abby's father still slaps him on his back and sits back down to watch some television. Abby's mother gives him a scoff, but she still welcomes him inside. Even teaches him a few culinary skills now that he's taken a more active role in the family.

All in all, it's pleasant. Some of the more distant relatives are a little

baffled by his presence, but they don't say it to his face. Not with the kids hanging off his arms every chance they get.

During a moment of reprieve, when his parents take Tanner and Charlotte outside to play in the snow, Langdon walks into an empty spare room.

There's a line of purses and coats on the bed. He makes room and sits down. Doesn't let himself think twice as he opens the usual contact card and hits 'call.'

"Frank?"

Should probably add them to his 'favorites' phone page. Would make it a whole lot faster than scrolling through his contacts.

"Yeah?"

"Why are you asking me?" The voice says. "You're the one who called."

"Right."

"Well?"

Langdon sighs. Tries to fight down the fluttering in his chest. "Just… missed you."

Robby's little exhale, breathy and charmed, nearly has him floating off the bed. "Thought you were at Abby's house."

"Still am. It's just…a lot. People are being nosy."

"Sounds like someone I know."

Langdon rolls his eyes. "I can't possibly be this bad."

"*Oh*, you'd think."

"You're hysterical today, Robby," Langdon says. "Was work that bad?"

Robby picks up on exactly what he needs. Talks Langdon through each case in that unhurried rhythm that forces Langdon to slow down his own racing thoughts.

"Sounds nice," Langdon comments after the silence becomes deafening.

“An aortic cross-clamping sounds nice?”

Well, he wasn’t paying attention, was he.

“Yeah,” Langdon says. He yawns, turning his head into his hand.

“Am I boring you?” Robby asks, amusement carrying over the phone’s hum.

“No.” The words slip out before he has the chance to check himself. “Your voice is nice.”

It’s quiet. A faint buzz in the background as Robby thinks. Then, he says, “you like my voice?”

It’s deeper. Not by much, but it’s enough to send heat climbing up his spine. “Jesus. Yeah, Robby. Don’t start anything you can’t finish.”

Robby barks a laugh. “*I* can finish just fine over here. I’m not the one stuck at his in-laws’ house.”

Langdon groans, flopping back on the bed. Runs a hand over his face as Robby’s amusement washes over him.

“You’re a tease,” he whines.

Langdon doesn’t recognize his own voice, but it must sound familiar enough to Robby, who sighs a deep breath that warms the pit of Langdon’s stomach.

“I’ll see you later,” Robby says. It's a goodbye as much as it is a promise. The assurance lights Langdon up from the inside out.

New Year's Eve is a little more normal. He’s still amazed at the difference a year can make.

Some crewmembers from work decided on a random bar in town to pile into. Robby’s sitting across from him at the big table section they reserved, but he keeps giving Langdon little looks like a hand wave.

There’s not much room, squished between more than a dozen people in one booth, to do much else besides look and talk to each other.

Langdon won’t get sappy about it, but…it’s a nice change. Really nice.

Nobody can stay out too late. Tomorrow is New Years after all, and with the new year will come a rush of drunk partiers, horrific firework

incidents, and the usual pile of emergency cases.

But, for now, Langdon can say it's nice, because he is sitting at some massive table, barely able to hear a word of what anyone's saying over the rowdy crowd and blaring music.

It doesn't matter though. He's with people he can finally acknowledge that he appreciates more than most things in the world. It took a while for him to realize that his appreciation wasn't a weakness.

Langdon looks around just to take it all in. Mel had borrowed some noise reduction earplugs from Santos. Some kind of concert essential she keeps in her going-out bag. Mel leans in close to hear what he has to say and genuinely laughs at the corny joke he makes.

McKay's on his other side. They aren't talking to each other, because they text way too much to have anything to say to each other in person. With each animated story McKay tells, she keeps bumping arms with Langdon. She's stopped apologizing after the second time, and he's stopped pretending to be bothered by it.

It's freezing outside, but Mateo still offers a game with the basketball in his car. Might as well, since the television ball won't drop for another hour, and the court just outside the bar looks tempting.

Langdon pretends like Santos smoking him doesn't do a little damage to his pride. Every basket she makes comes with a victorious screech like an eagle swooping in to their prey.

Whittaker looks absolutely hopeless. Langdon tossed the ball to him, but now he's sort of just standing there. He bounces the ball once, and it hits the ground at an odd angle. They all watch as the ball scutters away on the pavement.

"Huckleberry, you've played basketball before, haven't you?"

He stands there, hands wrenched together. "Uhhh, we weren't really a basketball group—growing up."

"Alright," Mateo says with a slap to his shoulder. "Come on, let me show you how to dribble."

They spend about ten minutes teaching Whittaker the basic mechanics. It's startling at how quickly he picks up the skills. His aim is atrocious though, always sending the ball soaring at the backboard rather than the basket.

Donnie looks up from his watch. “Shit, guys, we got thirty seconds to midnight.”

Langdon dumps the ball on Whittaker and takes a sprint for the door. Santos gets the same idea and waves, running behind him.

“Wait!” Whittaker shouts. The sound of the basketball’s dribble gets drowned beneath the drumming of feet across the court.

All six of them come tumbling through the narrow door. Limbs flailing and feet kicking each other as they stumble inside. Robby doesn’t even look surprised as they trip over themselves to get back to the table in time.

There’s ten seconds left on the board. As they count down, Langdon’s overcome with a wave of emotions. Too many to identify and too many to handle all at once. Just the idea that he’s pretty lucky to still find himself here.

The bar erupts in thunderous boom. Cheers nearly deafen his ears as people begin embracing each other.

Langdon looks down at the noise howling from next to him. Santos is shaking Whittaker by the shoulders, hollering. He’s nervous-looking, but his smile says that he’s just as exhilarated as her.

Santos happens to look up at him at the same time Langdon’s looking at her. The awkwardness gets hidden under the celebration. It’s what gives him the courage to hold out a fist. Santos scoffs, but she knocks knuckles with him.

Langdon takes in the love being spread around. Javadi and Mel, sitting rather quietly with each other, and shaking each other’s cupped hands. McKay’s bumping shoulders with Larry and Princess. Dana’s got her husband by the face, planting a kiss square on his face.

Maybe in another life, at a different time, he’d reach over to Robby. Be his first kiss of the new year.

But he doesn't. They lock eyes across the table, and he knows that the fire burning in his chest means Robby’s thinking the same thing.

It feels much more intimate of a gesture, despite the loneliness that *bumps-bumps-bumps* his chest.

Must be the cold from outside lingering in his lungs.

“Hey, fruitcake.”

Langdon spins around on the chair, looking up from the computer terminal. Scans around for the person responsible, because who the fuck just called him that.

“Oh hello, hot stuff.”

Myrna wheels closer. Her hands are cuffed to the side, per usual, but that doesn’t stop her from wiggling her eyebrows.

“Myrna,” Robby draws out. He bounds over from the other side of the nurse’s station. “What have I said about harassing my staff?”

“I would never do that,” she scoffs. “Do I look like I’d do that?”

Robby stands between them before Langdon can say that *yes, she definitely does*. He removes Langdon’s work ID from the terminal and replaces it with his own ID.

Never mind the fact there’s a perfectly fine and open computer a few feet away from them.

Robby’s arm blocks Langdon in from behind. His hand is gripped tight in the chair’s back. He is leaned entirely into his personal space, and his cologne is clouding his thoughts.

“Ignore her,” Robby grumbles low.

“She just called me a fruitcake,” Langdon argues. He looks up at Robby, who’s standing *very* close to him. Too close to call professional, and Langdon feels a strike of lightning in the pit of his stomach.

“She’s not talking to you,” Robby says, breath ghosting his ear. He’s typing something into a patient’s chart.

It takes Langdon a second before his eyes bug out of his head. “You? How does she know about—”

“Don’t ask.”

“Fruitcake! Don’t ignore me.”

Langdon peers over Robby’s arm. Feels his own breath ghost against Robby’s forearm where it peaks beneath his rolled up jacket sleeve. “Why are you even here, Myrna?”

“I poisoned the water supply at poker night.” She jingles the cuffs. “Does it look like I'm here by choice?”

“I see you so often, I’m starting to think you like Doctor Robby,” Langdon teases.

Robby glares down at him. It’s a *‘don't start this shit’* look. He keeps his grin hidden behind Robby’s arm still latched to the chair’s back. It's really too much fun pulling Robby's leg like this.

“No thanks,” Myrna says. “I prefer my men a little younger.”

Myrna’s eyes turn to Langdon, and she’s ogling at him like he’s a six course meal she’s about to ravish.

“I bet you like your men a little older though. Ain’t that right, hot shit?”

He doesn't even want to imagine how she knows his *preferences*, or if it’s truly that obvious, but Langdon won’t give her the satisfaction of seeing him lose his cool.

“You’re missing out, Myrna.”

It’s a telling statement, but so worth it. Myrna cackles, and Dana has to wheel her away to go bother someone else. When he rolls his eyes to look up at Robby, he sees the side of Robby’s face engulfed in red.

“Are you…blushing, Robby?” Langdon whispers.

He turns to look at the computer. Robby’s clicking on random icons and scrolling through files that Langdon knows he has no reason to be searching through.

“Go find a new patient,” Robby rumbles, ears flushed.

“You’re trying to punish me for that?” Langdon says in disbelief.

Robby looks down at him with a look that goes straight to Langdon’s stomach.

“It’s not a punishment if you like it, Doctor Langdon.”

It’s nothing scandalous. Not really. Bordering on flirtatious, maybe. It’s all in the huskiness of his tone that sends a flight of heat down between Langdon’s legs.

“Well…you know me. I—take everything in stride,” Langdon replies in a scatter of words.

“New patient,” Robby orders. “Go.”

Robby pushes away from the computer, and the distance makes it obvious just how close he had been leaning into his space. Like a switch in his brain, Langdon stands up and marches over to the patient board.

Maybe if he breaks his personal best record of patients seen in an hour, Robby’s voice will stop replaying in his head.

Langdon’s phone buzzes in the middle of a fracture reduction. Doesn’t pay the thing any mind. He sets his hands above the patient’s elbow as one of the new medical students got him by the wrist.

“Feel for the bone, and when then—”

His phone vibrates again. He sneaks a look in his pocket to see Abby’s name pop up.

“Uhh, do you need to take that?” Javadi asks with a straight face.

“No!” Langdon shouts out. He hangs his head and remembers to breathe. He brings Javadi over to take his place. She’s done this before, and he has faith in her ability to do it again. “Feel for the misalignment. You got this.”

Javadi nods and sets the patient’s arm back. It’s not the last thing they have left to do, but it’s a step in the right direction. He’s in there for five more minutes before the patient stabilizes. The rest of the staff can handle that.

The trauma room door bangs open, and Langdon storms out. He leans against the nurse’s station and stares at the board without really looking at anything.

“Wow,” McKay says, sliding next to him. “Someone’s in a mood.”

“When is he not?” Collins mutters as she scrolls on the computer.

“Yes, I definitely wanted to hear from the peanut gallery, thank you,” Langdon grumbles.

“What’s got you in such a knot?” McKay asks, bumping his shoulders.

“Abby keeps blowing up my phone.”

“Why? Thought you two weren’t talking,” Collins asks.

“Didn’t ask.” Langdon grumbles.

McKay and Collins look at each other from across the station. “Don’t you think this may be something important?”

Langdon shakes his head. “She’d say that.”

With a scoff, Collins stands up and shakes her head. She leaves with, “don’t even bother.”

His smartwatch buzzes for the tenth time in a minute, and Langdon almost throws the damn thing across the room.

“This better be life or death!”

He storms past the gurney rushing past him as he leaves into the medical bay. Digs his phone out of his pocket and answers the incoming call.

“Fuck, Abby, I’m at work. What the hell—”

“Frank, it’s my dad. He fainted. I—uhhm. We’re going to the hospital.”

Langdon feels his breath still in his lungs. “To mine?”

“No, they’re taking him to Saint Clair’s, but I have to get someone to watch the kids.”

“What happened to that babysitter—”

“You think I’d be bothering you right now if that was an option?”

Langdon snaps his stupid mouth shut. Lets Abby get all this out, because she’s clearly in a mood and he’s finally learned that arguing with her gets them nowhere.

“Bring them here.”

“I’m a few minutes away. You were going to watch them regardless.”

A click rings in his ear as Abby ends the call. He rubs a hand across his forehead. He’ll walk back inside. Just…give him a minute.

Fuck.

Tires screech against the ground as Langdon walks inside. Watches Ahmad walk past him as he pushes through a sea of people. He should probably tell Robby that his kids need to be parked in the waiting room for the last three hours of their shift.

“Well?” McKay asks, nosy as ever.

“Something about her dad in the hospital. She’s bringing Tanner and Charlotte here.”

“Bring-your-kids-to-work day. Always a fun occasion.”

“Exactly.”

“Guess I should go find Robby,” Langdon mutters, mostly to himself. He ignores McKay’s little shove against him and her wiggling eyebrows.

“Doctor Langdon?”

Langdon turns around at the sound of his name. Ahmad’s walking towards him with a confused look.

“Some woman claiming to be your wife is parked in the ambulance bay.”

McKay’s snort drowns out the last part of that sentence. She slaps a hand across his back before leaving towards the central rooms.

“Are you serious?” Langdon grumbles.

“Want me to send her away.”

“No, just…let me handle this.”

He marches back outside in time to see Abby’s SUV reverse out of the ambulance parking. She jumps out of her car with wide eyes.

“Frank, Jesus, you took forever—”

“Visitor parking’s the other way.”

“You’re such an asshole,” she grumbles.

After a deep breath, she opens the backseat. As soon as she unbuckles

the kids, they come flying out the doors.

“Hi, daddy!”

“Hey, buddy!”

Langdon bends down, swooping Tanner into the air. Sets him down to do the same to Charlotte.

“This is awesome!” Tanner shouts. His voice echoes in the bay. “We only see you on—on Saturday and Sunday, but it’s Tuesday!”

“Yeah,” Langdon says. “Dad’s at work right now though, so you’ll have to stay in the break room.”

“Okay! Do I get to see you work?”

“Uhh, maybe.”

Abby waves to the kids and buries herself back into the car. “I’ll update you on when I can pick them up.”

“It’s fine, Abby,” Langdon says looking up. “Seriously, just—worry about your dad.”

“Trust me, I am.”

She speeds off, leaving a trail of dust and smoke behind. Will probably end up back here as a patient if she keeps driving like that.

“Alright, let's get this over with.”

Langdon walks them hand-in-hand back into the department. As soon as he walks in, every eye is glued to them. Whether it's because they thought he was an incoming patient or just a doctor with two strange kids attached to his hips.

“Who’s kids are these?” Whittaker asks, pointing down.

“Mine.”

“Oh. Hi…kids.”

“Hi! I’m Tanner!”

Langdon realizes too late that there may be too many people for both of his kids. Tanner’s too social, and he’ll talk off the ear of every

doctor, nurse, social worker, medical assistant, security staff. *Fuck*, he'll probably even have a lovely time chatting with Myrna. They're all lucky she's not here—today, that is.

Charlotte's the opposite. Too asocial and shy to even want to be in the sight of so many people. She's hiding further behind him like she can crawl into his leg and hide.

Her beady eyes are blinking up at Whittaker who is only encouraging her deranged stare by wordlessly looking back at her. Their little staring competition is freaking Langdon out, so he steers them towards the break room.

"Come on," Langdon ushers.

He doesn't make it past the nurse's station without being stopped again.

"Who are these two?" Dana asks, crouching down.

"I'm Tanner! I'm five. My dad works here! Do you know my dad?"

"Hi, Tanner," Dana parrots back with a smile. "I do know your dad. And who are you?"

Charlotte clings harder to his pant leg.

"I'm Dana," she says with a wink. She looks up at him. "Want me to bring them to the break room?"

"Yeah, if you—"

Charlotte's grip on his pants loosen. He looks down to watch her run away from the station.

"Hey—Charlotte!"

Charlotte throws her arms around a man's cargo pants. Langdon drags his eyes up to watch Robby look down the top of her head with a raised eyebrow before bending down. With a loud groan, he picks her up, supporting her bottom with an arm. She throws his arms around his neck.

"What are you doing here, little monkey?" Robby asks. His eyes find Langdon with a pointed look.

"Uhhh, Abby's dad, medical emergency. No babysitter," Langdon

explains in a lame tone.

“Ahh.” Robby rubs a hand across Charlotte’s back. Soothing and firm. An undeniable presence. “It’s loud in here, huh.”

Charlotte nods.

“I know somewhere that’s more quiet. Should we go there?”

Charlotte nods again. Her fingers grip at his beard. Langdon’s breath catches at his small smile hiding under the facial hair. Everyone stares too. It’s too abnormal of a sight not to.

“Can we play princesses again?” She asks.

“I can’t right now, but maybe later if we have the time. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Robby repeats back, softer.

“Mister Robby!” Tanner shouts.

His tiny feet are barely a whisper in the department as he storms towards Robby. He tugs on his jacket.

“Hey, little man.” Robby ruffles a hand through Tanner’s dirty blonde hair. “We’re about to go to the break room. Do you want to come with us?”

“Yeah! My dad is at work, so he can’t play, but can you play?”

“I’m at work too, so I can’t either,” Robby explains, holding a hand out for Tanner to grab onto.

“Work doesn’t sound fun.”

“You got that right,” Robby guffaws. He walks past Langdon without a second glance, and he’s stunned at the ease Robby has wheedling his kids around.

Langdon’s foot follows Robby, but the doors of the ambulance bay push open. The EMTs rush by, and Mel is running to the gurney, and Robby—

“You got this,” Robby says over his shoulder. It’s like a command, the

way Langdon's spine spikes up and he huffs. Nods and a renewed sense of calm and confidence waves over him.

He helps the gurney move into Trauma Two as Robby moves his kids into the break room

It takes an hour before he's given a five minute gap to check in on them.

When he walks into the break room, he sees his kids at the table, sandwiched between Santos and Whittaker.

Whittaker coughs, and Santos' back shoots straight. She looks over her shoulder, crayon in hand.

"Hey, Doctor Langdon!" Santos says, a little too loud. "How's—"

"Trying to squeeze gossip out of my kids?"

"I wasn't—"

Langdon rounds the table. Rubs a hand in two of his kids' hairs. "Save it. They don't know a thing."

"That's not true," Tanner says. "My teacher says that my A, B, and Cs are really good."

"Yes, that *is* true," Langdon says, messing up Tanner's hair even more. He swats at his hand with a scrunched face.

He looks at the table. Whittaker and Santos are filling in the same page out of some coloring book Kiara must have provided. Their colors aren't meshing together at all. Charlotte must have ripped a page out of the book. She's drawing on a blank sheet.

"What are you drawing, baby?" Langdon asks, leaning in.

She doesn't move away, too absorbed into her own art. "I'm drawing us."

Langdon feels his heart draw tight. "That's great. Can I see?"

Charlotte leans back and moves her finger to each figure. "That's mommy, and grandma and grandpa. Meemaw and Papa. Me. You and Robby and Doll."

His face flares with a blush. Looks up to see Whittaker and Santos

exchange a look. Santos turns slowly to give the look to Langdon too, and if his kids weren't in the room, he'd really tell her to shut it.

Langdon pulls his mouth up in an imitation of a smile.

"That's really great," Langdon forces himself to say. Pats Charlotte's back as she continues to color in the background.

Robby runs cold. It took a long time for Langdon to notice. He had to learn how to desensitize himself to Robby's touch, or rather, get used to the fact that Robby is a touchy person.

And he likes to touch.

A lot.

He only notices at first, because he was touching fucking Whittaker of all people. Steering him this way and that way with two firm hands on his shoulders.

All the goddamn time.

Worst of all, Langdon is pretty sure he isn't doing it to draw a reaction out of him. He's just…naturally touchy like that with some people.

And, well. It *naturally* drives Langdon up the wall.

"Doctor Langdon," Robby repeats.

Langdon snaps his head up. Robby looms over him, arms stuffed into his pockets.

"What did you say?" Langdon asks, squinting like he's staring at the sun.

"I *asked* why our patient in central four hasn't been discharged yet, but I see you're too busy dozing off."

It was just the right thing to say to piss him the hell off. Or maybe it is the final straw that snaps his patience after the exhaustion of the shift, the lack of sleep from the night before, and the loneliness of his apartment. Langdon glares up at Robby, not budging from his post.

"If you want to know so bad, why don't you ask Whittaker?"

Robby narrows his eyes. He readjusts his stance, crossing his arms and

gripping at his biceps. His hands can barely fit around the strained muscles under his jacket.

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“You keep hauling him around everywhere. He probably knows everything going on with you and your patients.”

Robby juts his head around, looking. No one even bats an eye to the thick tension between them. Langdon removes his ID from the computer system and hands Robby a chart.

“Here’s the lab results, *boss*. See for yourself why we haven’t discharged yet.”

He walks away, leaving Robby to examine the lab results and inform *Whittaker* of the next steps. Langdon’s been demoted to some useless senior resident while Whittaker has suddenly taken his spot beside Robby.

It’s infuriating. Humiliating, even, that he cares this much, but he does. Maybe months ago when he thought this thing between them was some one-sided delusion, the jealousy would make more sense.

He’s got Robby locked down now, but he feels the relationship slipping through his fingers. Like maybe Robby’s just toying with him. Some warm body he’s keeping a close eye on, because he doesn’t trust him.

It takes an astonishing four hours before Robby hounds at him from across the hallway.

“Got a minute?”

“No,” Langdon snaps immediately. He remembers where he is and fixes his attitude. “What is it?”

Robby’s palm is rough on the back of his neck. He’s tugging hard at him, pulling him along like a dog on a leash. A heat blares across his face at not the idea, but the intrigue that bubbles after it.

His feet stumble to catch up until he’s tossed into a central room. Robby keeps the door wide open, but otherwise, no one is around them. Just the busy bees hustling in the hallway just outside.

“What—”

“Are you jealous of how I interact with the other doctors here, Doctor Langdon?”

“Hello to you too?"

Robby crosses his arms. There’s anger on his face. Impatience too in the way he’s standing.

“I asked you a question.”

Langdon curls his bottom lip between his teeth. “Fuck—Robby, I’m a grown man. I’m above that sort of thing.”

“Is that why you snapped at me earlier?”

They stare at each other. Robby bends his knees to look Langdon in the eye. It’s demeaning and embarrassing to be treated like this. To be talked down to while Robby assumes control over the situation.

There’s a heat in his face, and maybe it's from the humiliation of being caught, but then the heat travels down.

“Uhhmm,” Langdon answers.

The words get stuck in his throat. He needs to run out of here. Being under Robby’s direct attention right now is burning him from the inside out.

Robby doesn’t let him go anywhere. He plants a strong hand on Langdon’s shoulder. High enough up to cover his neck.

“If there is something bothering you, you need to tell me.”

“Why, because we’re….what? Seeing each other?”

“No, because I’m your *boss*.”

Langdon feels himself melt under the command. The words crawl out of him as he tilts toward Robby. Shifts his stance to try and keep some semblance of balance, but Robby’s unyielding hand means he’s not going anywhere without his say so.

“You keep touching Whittaker,” Langdon starts. “Were you doing that on purpose to…make me jealous?”

Robby looks pensive. Rocks on his feet before saying, “not at first.”

Langdon nearly cracks with anger. “Fucking, Robby—”

And Robby, the bastard that he is, smiles. It’s small but victorious and gleaming, because he riled Langdon up just the right amount.

“Stop that,” Langdon grumbles.

“Stop what?” Robby asks, leaning in.

“Stop touching other people like that.”

“Okay.”

Langdon pauses. “Just like that?”

“Did you want me to fight you on this? I could put up a better argument if you want.”

“No…no. It’s fine.”

Robby huffs a laugh. Looks around before squeezing Langdon’s neck tight. He walks out of the room like nothing happened at all.

Langdon forces himself to take a breather before going back out there.

After that, his touches start to ramp up dramatically. It’s vindictive to watch and be amused by Robby walking side-by-side with Whittaker, knowing his hands would have been kneading in his shoulders and steering them every which way. Whittaker doesn't even seem to notice the difference. His head’s always down as he scurries around.

Fuck, does it feel good to have control over something like this. Robby always used to be some untouchable figure. Someone to put on a shelf and admire his grandiosity from afar. But now, he’s just a man wrapped around Langdon’s fingers.

Or rather, *Langdon’s* the one wrapped around his fingers. More specifically, being pushed and moved with those rough hands.

When Langdon stares at the patient board, Robby curls a hand around the back of his neck. Tells him to stop cherry-picking cases, and Langdon pretends to agree.

He could be moving past a crowd of nurses, and Robby, perched against the wall with a form, stops him with a large palm to his chest.

Even when they’re in the goddamn trauma rooms, Robby puts a quick

hand to his lower back to move behind him in the tight space. Langdon's too much of a professional to let that impede his technique, but goddamn does it make his head spin for the rest of the day.

This isn't something he thought he'd want. It feels all too good to be displayed like this to the rest of the world. Maybe he should snap at Robby more often if this is the results.

Chapter End Notes

> sorry if this is toooo slowburn. when i was first writing this, it was less centered around a plot and more just different situations i put them in like toy dolls i smush together :) when i write, its more so vignettes than plot-driven scenes so yeah!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Langdon’s unsure if his instinctive paranoia is rearing its ugly head, but he has the strong feeling that people are talking about him. Specifically, about him with *Robby*.

And it's not that he isn't aware the people he spends twelve hours a day with gossip like a bunch of middle schoolers, but it reminds him that this thing between him and Robby exists in more than just the confines of Robby's townhouse.

He’s not sure if it’s because of what happened a while ago with his kids visiting the department or with Robby suddenly manhandling him around, but knowing this place, it’s probably a combination.

He leans back against the nurse’s station as Robby reviews the lab results beside him. He’s rocking back and forth, attention wandering. Boredom's good. It means he’s gotten back into the swing of things at the Pitt.

Noise surrounds them. It’s kind of the defining feature of the ER—but two distinct voices capture his interest. He cranes his neck to catch a peek.

“Did you hear about those two?” Perlah asks in Tagalog, heading tilted at Princess. She looks up at Langdon, swaying in her chair, before averting eye contact.

“No? They got into a fight again?” Princess asks.

“It wasn’t a fight. They’re doing something else.”

“You’re kidding!” Princess raises her voice, mouth dropping.

“He hasn't been wearing that ring for a reason,” Perlah adds with a smirk.

Langdon narrows his eyes. Princess looks up from his hands with that same shocked expression. She coughs into her fist, tightening her face into a neat, professional smile.

Not even fucking trying. If Robby were paying any attention, she would at least have the decency of looking contrite.

“Please, no need for the flattery. I’m only human,” Langdon teases. He barely contains his smirk at Princess’ dismay.

“Play nice, Doctor Langdon,” Robby reprimands from beside him. His back is facing them both, but he turns to the side to hand back the lab results. “Looks good. Go let the mom know and discharge."

“You got it, boss.”

Robby clasps a hand on the top of his back as he passes behind him. Langdon doesn’t give a second glance as he walks away. The lingering heat from his touch is enough to keep him going till the end of the shift.

Princess voice chimes up again. *“I see it now.”*

They both stare at him with rather creepy looks. By creepy, Langdon means delighted. It’s never a good sign when those two are grinning together.

“Don’t you have patients to torment?” Langdon asks without any real bite.

Princess rolls her eyes, but she motions for Perlah to follow her. Langdon scoffs to himself. He pushes off the counter but stops as he sees Santos stand from the computer.

“Hey,” he asks, letting curiosity get the best of him. “Were they talking about me just now?”

Santos raises an eyebrow. Points at their chairs before looking back at him. “Them? Noooo. I wouldn't worry about it. Probably was nothing."

“Yeah,” Langdon says, nodding. “Alright.”

If she says it’s nothing then…it could be anything. They’ve reached a pact of neutrality, though, so Langdon will take her word for it.

Not like he has any other choice.

It’s another sleepless, insomnia-fueled night at Robby’s townhouse. Langdon is lounged across the couch with his feet propped up on

Robby's lap. His fingers knead out the knots that had formed after a long day. The other hand is flat on the arm rest and skimming through a book Langdon thinks he's already read before.

There's a quiet buzz humming in the back of Langdon's brain. Robby's dressed in the most average outfit. Sweats and a zip-up jacket. Yet, there's some part of his brain that's been rewired to find those clothing items appealing. Or maybe it's just Robby's casual handsomeness throwing him off.

It's unfortunate he isn't confident about how to express that. He'll make a fool of himself, for sure, and Robby will….well. He probably won't laugh Langdon out of the house, but it'll definitely be an embarrassing moment trying to—what? *Seduce* him?

Yeah, right.

The channel they randomly scrolled to is playing old reruns of that medical drama show *'ER.'* Langdon was in the middle of high school when that show ended, but he remembers those first few seasons with muted nostalgia.

It was one of the main motivations that spurred his interest in emergency medicine. His parents would record the older seasons for him to watch when he told them this.

Yes, the show was crucial to his current career path, but as the episode plays out in front of him, he's starting to think there are other reasons for enjoying the show. Maybe he's recalling such fond memories of the show *'ER,'* because of George Clooney's character. Or, more accurately, George Clooney in general.

He remembers paying extra attention whenever he was in a scene, and, when looking over to Robby, his younger self's intense concentration is starting to make more sense beyond an innocent enthusiasm for medicine.

Langdon squints, eyes pacing from the TV to Robby. Actually, now that he's really focusing on the show, Robby sort of resembles one of the characters.

Leaning up, he lets a scene pass before the character walks into the room. Like that, the resemblance snaps in place.

On the screen, a much younger version of Robby in a neat, tailored white coat bounces across the hospital. It's almost uncanny, and

unnatural, to see such a similar copy of Robby acting so cheerful.

It's actually off-putting how unlike they are. Yet, there's Robby's identical face gleaming back at him on the screen with that wide smile.

"Hey, Robby," Langdon whispers.

"Mmm?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like—"

Robby heaves a groan. Doesn't glance up from his book as he grumbles, "please don't say it."

Langdon raises an eyebrow and looks over. "Say what?"

"Do you know how many times I've been told I look like John Carter?"

"Guess someone has told you," Langdon says, falling back into the cushions. "You have to admit that it's pretty uncanny."

Robby rolls his eyes. "I do *not* look like that."

The scene keeps playing, and the camera shot changes. It's a close up of John Carter talking to another doctor. The fact Robby cannot, or maybe refuses to, see the likeness is bordering on insanity.

Langdon points a hand at the TV. "How are you not seeing this?"

"I'm not sure how you are. We have about a thirty year age difference."

He has to bite his lip to keep himself from breaking out into a grin. Robby's patience with him has started wearing thin. It's obvious in how he's placed the book down and is glaring at him from over his frames.

"Jealous I'm commenting about the good-looking younger doctor?" Langdon teases.

"You think I'm good-looking?"

"Wasn't talking about you, was I."

Robby smirks. It's barely a twitch of his lips, but it's cheeky,

nonetheless. “Well, you *did* say we look alike.”

“Now you see the resemblance?”

Robby’s eyebrows raise together. “To that baby-faced kid? Maybe not, but I’ll take the compliment.”

The couch dips as Langdon curls closer. He cups a hand around Robby’s cheek and plants a kiss on his lips. Robby’s face scrunches as he glares at Langdon.

“Don't be jealous,” he hears himself coo. “I still think you’re cuter.”

“I’d hope so,” Robby mutters against his mouth. “He has to be in his early twenties.”

Langdon backs away enough to see his face. Robby’s hand low on his back keeps them close together. “You realize I’m thirty-three, yeah? I’m closer to his age to than yours.”

It’s fun watching the colors drain from Robby’s face. His eyes widen before he shakes his head.

“*Fuuuuck*,” Robby groans under his breath. He drags a slow hand down his face.

Langdon can’t stop the laugh that comes out of him. It’s downright hilarious—and predictable—that Robby’s actively avoiding that line of thought.

“You’re kind of a pervert,” Langdon taunts.

He’s horrified that he says that in means to *flirt* with Robby. The warm pit spreading in his stomach isn’t helping his case either. So what if it’s attractive that Robby’s got some years over him? Experience and wisdom and hands that know exactly what to do with Langdon’s body.

It shouldn’t be a tempting idea. Not at all, and Robby must think the same thing, because he’s staring at Langdon with a look he really hasn’t seen before. Almost fiery and revved up like he’s about to start a fight.

“Shut up,” Robby says before kissing him again. He tilts them, and Langdon gets squished between Robby’s body and the firm couch.

Robby’s hands are rough, squeezing his face tight. It’s comforting to be held so closely between Robby’s fingers. Like he won’t slip out of

his grasp this time. As if all of Robby's attention is tunnel visioned solely on him. Maybe if they did this more often it wouldn't make Langdon's hands shake. His body isn't used to Robby roughhousing with his body, but with how his heart thumps loud in his ears, Langdon could *definitely* grow familiar quickly.

Sometime between Robby moving a hand to paw at his back from under his shirt and mouthing at his jawline, Langdon finds the energy to peel his eyes open. His head lulls to the side, breathy exhale on his lips.

The TV cuts back from a commercial break, and John Carter bursts through one of the ER doors in such a drama-show way that never actually happens in his own ER, Langdon would roll his eyes. *Would*, because he can't quite tear his gaze away from those youthful features.

"Seriously, Robby, that guy's got your exact face," Langdon says.

Robby sighs against his neck, and Langdon shivers as he pulls back. Robby gives him a rather unimpressed look, but *goddamn* are the similarities astonishing.

"You have a problem mentioning other men while you're with me," Robby grumbles.

He smirks. Wrapping his arms around Robby's neck, he lets himself get more comfortable against the couch. Robby's seething with annoyance, but he lets Langdon wiggle around as he pleases in his arms.

"You're still the sexiest guy I've ever seen. Even better than George Clooney."

Robby rolls his eyes as he leans back on the couch. Langdon's legs flop back into his lap, but this time, they're spread wide, ankles hanging off the armrest. His crotch, the area tight and uncomfortable now, is in his direct view.

The angle is exhilarating—Robby leering down at him like he's a meal that he doesn't know where to bite into first.

The rush of blood makes him say stupid things.

"Want me to prove it? I can—if you want."

He's not sure where that came from. There's never been a time before where he uses such vulgar language. Well, not vulgar in the slightest, but it's such an obvious innuendo. The lewdness is less shocking than the fact that he means it.

Robby's eyes roam down his body. Feather light without a hint of physical weight, but Langdon still feels it like a string being pulled through his chest. His eyes travel to where his shirt is hiked above the pantline. Like Robby can tell there's a storm of butterflies fluttering in his core.

Then, his eyes hover over Langdon's crotch, and he feels his face engorge in flames.

"I think you already have."

Holy shit.

He needs Robby's hands in him right fucking now.

Instead of grabbing Langdon by the waist and yanking him onto his lap, or wrestling a hand down his boxers, or even massaging the bulge on the front of his pants, he leans back with a smirk.

With raised eyebrows, Robby moves his eyes back to the book. Langdon realizes he never even let the book down. Just manhandled Langdon into total compliance with just one hand.

Oh my fucking god.

What is he supposed to do with the twitchy warmth in his body?

Superstitions have never been part of Langdon's vocabulary. He doesn't believe in any of that crap.

So, he says with a proud chest and loud voice that it's so slow in the ER today they have enough time to lounge in the breakroom for a few minutes and snack.

"Are you and Dave doing anything special for Valentine's?" Mohan asks from the seat beside him.

Dana sets up a new pot of coffee. She hums. "Just going out to some fancy restaurant. He likes those kind of candle-lit places that sell stupidly expensive wine."

“Wow, that’s nice,” Mohan coos, like Dana had described anything remotely charming.

Langdon scoffs from where he’s sitting at the table. Scrolls on his phone to read some news article McKay sent him.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” Dana snaps. spinning around with a hand on her hip.

“I didn’t even say anything,” Langdon argues.

She marches over, leaning a hand on the table. “And I hope you have something planned for your Valentine.”

He swallows and feels a giant lump in his throat. It’s never a great sign when Dana’s hounding him about something.

Licking his lips, Langdon asks, “what makes you think I’m seeing someone?”

Dana’s expression is slow to change, but it says everything. The raised eyebrow, the slight curl to her lips, and *oh my god,* she fucking knows —

“Just my striking intuition,” she says. “Which is telling me that your Valentine’s gonna be real upset if you don’t do a thing.”

Then, like a ghost, she floats out of the room. Mohan’s little whispered ‘wow’ is the understatement of the century. She turns to him with a curious look.

“So, *are* you seeing someone?”

Langdon knows how quickly the gossip spreads around here. He knows, because he’s in those circles. No matter what he responds with, one person will twist that answer and ten people will get the distorted version.

Then again, if *Dana* is telling him, it sort of confirms that just about everybody knows. She had to have heard it from someone. Maybe one of the lingering staff filtering in and out of the break room caught onto him.

The realization that maybe she found out from Robby makes his heart flutter like some schoolgirl with a crush.

Langdon bows his head. The table’s fake wood design looks very nice.

“I’m—uhhh. Yeah, something like that.”

“Hey, that’s exciting!”

It only takes three hours before McKay corners and berates him for finding out about his ‘official’ relationship status through the rumor mill.

In Dana’s defense, he probably should have kept a sharper eye on the calendar. He’s not sure how this day had slipped his mind, but then the past few years start to trickle into memory.

Last Valentine’s Day, he was speaking to his therapist about how his ex-wife was *‘tearing his family apart,'* still seething about not being able to set up Valentine's-themed gift bags for them like he had done every other year.

The Valentine’s before that was spent in a near-manic haze as Langdon planned an elaborate scheme to cover the house in petals and candles. Abby hadn’t appreciated the sentiment when she pointed out who exactly was going to have to clean it up.

So, yeah. Langdon’s currently zero for two against the corporate scheme that is Valentine’s Day, and his confidence has taken quite the hit from it.

He’s not even sure if Robby’s into this sort of stuff. Maybe he’ll take one look at Langdon and laugh him out of Pittsburgh.

It’s better than the alternative. Robby, sitting at home, waiting to hear from Langdon and unsure of his own romantic approaches.

So, Langdon doesn’t let himself think twice as he lets himself into Robby’s house. It’s actually concerningly easy when the front door isn’t even locked.

He slips the door shut and creeps into the kitchen with his supplies. Thanks any entity that’s listening that Doll sleeps upstairs. Otherwise, this entire plan would go up in flames—like the house if he gets caught, because he’ll be *damned* if he lets some golden doodle ruin his plan.

About twenty minutes later, the stairs creak and moan. Doll’s barks overshadow the house’s noises as she comes sprinting full force at him. She’s grown so much over the year that she practically tackles

him to the ground with one push.

Robby stares up at him, sleepy eyes blinking with apparent shock.

“Hey,” Langdon says. He feels his own self-consciousness bubbling to the surface, but *fuck* he needs to see this through to the end.

“Is there a burglar in my house cooking me breakfast, or am I dreaming?”

Langdon grins. He puts the stove’s heat on low and exits the kitchen’s massive open doorway.

“You’re dreaming,” Langdon whispers.

“I must be.”

They stare at each other from across the room. He feels sort of ridiculous now, replaying his own actions in his head. Breaking into Robby’s house and rummaging around like he’s got a spot here.

Maybe it’s an unwelcome intrusion, and Robby’s actually hiding his annoyance.

Then, after a long moment,

Robby raises a single arm, and like a magnet, Langdon lets himself get pulled in. He slings his own arm over Robby’s shoulder and plants a slow kiss on his lips. He tastes like warmth and sleep.

“Did you just wake up?” Langdon asks. He feels his own breath on Robby’s face. “It’s 9 o’clock.”

“I’d still be getting some beauty sleep if I didn’t think my house was burning down.”

“And you’d just let it happen? You were moving pretty slow, but I think it’s too early in the morning for ‘old man’ jokes.”

Robby shrugs. “Could collect some house insurance and move into a bigger place.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Do you want some eggs with that concerning train of thought?”

“If you’re offering.”

Langdon is in fact offering, so he moves into the kitchen to make a quick batch of scrambled eggs, letting Doll outside on the way over. He's been getting better at cooking, though he doubts anyone would believe him if he said that.

His only evidence is that Robby's peaking over his shoulder as he pours the egg yolks into the pan. Like Langdon's doing something completely abstract and unique, fresh out of a recipe book.

"You really went all out," Robby comments.

His eyes look at the spread of sliced sausages for himself, hashbrown, toast with different jams. He knew Robby didn't have any of this beforehand. His fridge is nearly desolate besides protein shakes, milk, and frozen microwaveable meals. Langdon also made sure ahead of time he only bought ingredients that were kosher.

As much as neither of them talk about religion (from Robby's hesitance and Langdon's own lack of belief), he still knows that Star of David leaves an imprint on Robby's chest. He's not sure how much Robby actually keeps kosher, but he wanted to cover all his bases without asking and giving the surprise away.

"I know you don't eat enough, so I thought this would be a nice surprise," Langdon says, turning back to the stove.

"It is," Robby says. He pulls aside the collar of Langdon's sweater and plants a kiss to the skin just beneath. Langdon pretends he doesn't hear a *'you are'* under his breath.

Robby's trying to teach Tanner how to catch and pitch a ball. He's taken some interest into baseball that he has a feeling will fade in a few weeks.

Last month, Tanner was into gymnastics before realizing it wasn't just rolling around and more about actual moves requiring flexibility and precision.

Langdon would be the one showing him, but his back is acting up and he's been benched—literally. He's sitting on the park bench watching Robby demonstrate the arm motions of a throw.

Robby had made the stupid assumption that teaching catch to a child couldn't be that difficult, and he can't resist being a spectator to that soon-to-be disaster.

And, well…it's going as good as teaching a hyperactive five year old can get. He's mostly just thrilled to be outdoors. Doll keeps running after the ball before Tanner even sees it get thrown.

He snaps a picture. Zooms in on Tanner and then slides over to Robby. Frozen in time, he sees Robby's cheeky grin as Tanner chases after one of the tennis balls. After a moment, he decides to send it to McKay.

The reply he gets is almost instantaneous.

Cass [11:46]: Are you at Fowlerr??????

He raises an eyebrow. Looks over his shoulder just to make sure.

Cass [11:47]: Hey Answer

Langdon [11:47]: YES JESUS

Cass [11:48]: Great!!! Im coming to crash your date

Langdon [11:48]: no thank you

Langdon would move to the opposite side of the park, but Tanner looks pretty happy here. Like a dog unleashed. Charlotte's on the sidewalk beside them with her gigantic box of chalk that her grandmother had gifted her for the holidays. It'd be rude to ask an artist to move her easel.

He nearly spits out his coffee as a tough arm rounds his neck. Knuckles grind into his head.

"Hey, sucker!"

"Stop that." Langdon swats at her arms. "What are you—a 90s high school bully? You're so lame."

McKay leans forward, arms circling his neck from behind. Her hands fall flat on his shoulders as she looks him in the eyes.

"Mind if Harrison joins?"

"The more the merrier," Langdon mutters.

McKay nods to Harrison. He's timid in his behavior, but he approaches Robby with as much confidence as any twelve year old can muster.

The shock on Robby's face at seeing McKay's kid in public is too good.

His eyes jump from Harrison to McKay before he looks back at Harrison with a smile, amicable and open.

“What are you doing up so early?” Langdon asks.

Her hair breezes into his face. He has to push aside her hair strands before the wind plucks them into his mouth.

McKay scoffs. She pushes a foot on the top of the bench and hops over. Slots herself next to Langdon, their touching thighs a source of body heat.

“I think you meant, ‘hi Cass, it’s really good to see you!’”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Whatever,” McKay grumbles. “Harrison wanted to practice his skating but doesn’t trust his dad to take him after last time.”

He snickers. “I wouldn’t trust Chad to do anything either.”

McKay’s lip quivers as she chuckles. She delights in any quip made at Chad’s expense. He makes it way too easy.

“I think Harrison wants some siblings to practice with, but I don’t know how to tell him that’s definitely not happening.”

Langdon looks back over at the lot of them. Robby’s playing Monkey in the Middle, despite the fact he’s well over six feet tall. Tanner can barely throw the ball past his shoulders, nearly whacking Robby in the chest every time.

“Well, if it’s something you want, he’s got Charlotte and Tanner.”

McKay turns to him, eyes squinting with the faint smile she’s trying to conceal. “Yeah?”

“He’s a good kid, Cass. I think they’d be lucky to have someone like him around more often.”

She smiles, settling further into the bench. “Yeah, we’d all be pretty lucky, huh.”

McKay knocks their heads together. It feels good to have found a life partner in her. There’s no romance between them, and he would hardly call it lovey-dovey as he rests his cheek on her head.

Despite it all, she's still someone he would fight for. She's become his closest ally and mentor. He would even dare to say she's like an older sister at this point.

Harrison vaults over. "Hey, mom. Can I show Tanner my skateboard?"

McKay's expression locks down. Langdon can physically see the thought process she's going through until she says, "No one rides that thing without a helmet—and no speeding up with it either."

"Okay!"

He leaps around the bench, and Langdon eyes follow, only to find Charlotte sitting on the skateboard. She's using it as a conveyor belt to move from one drawing to the next.

His smart little engineer. Langdon can't hide his pride.

He looks back up to find Robby standing in front of them, winter jacket bundling him up all the way to his beard. Tanner is propped on Robby's toes, tiny hands curled into the palms of Robby's enormous hands.

"Did you see me catch the ball?!"

"Yeah, buddy, I did. That was killer. Hey, you remember Cass?"

"Hi, Miss Cass."

"Hey, nice throws!" McKay encourages.

"Thanks! My dad is bad at throwing the ball." Then, Tanner waddles away like he hadn't just shredded his dignity into halves.

Langdon runs a hand down his face, trying not to find this whole thing hilarious. McKay's got it covered though, face contorting with laughter.

"Nice to see you, McKay," Robby says.

McKay, once she's finally done being fulfilled by Tanner insulting his father's name, wipes at the tears in her eyes. She looks up with a smile.

"You too. So—" She swings her head around to see Harrison attempting a trick on his skateboard. It's fine, except the helmet is on Tanner's head. She stands up with a grumble. "Hey, Harrison! What'd

I say?”

As she walks away, Langdon takes the time to look Robby up and down. It *is* good to see him. Out in the sun, away from the fluorescent lights of the ER. Where he isn’t caged between the eggshell white walls and a flurry of patients. Free to just exist and breathe without waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Langdon had learned that lesson a long time ago, alone. It's strange to see their roles reverse and teach Robby something new.

“So,” Robby drawls. “You and McKay. Didn’t realize you two were so close.”

On second notice, Langdon realizes Robby’s face is closed off. His posture is tight, hands dug deep into the pockets of his winter coat.

“What?” Langdon asks. His brain catches up, trying to think of an approach Robby can digest. “Yeah, we ran into each other while I was still fresh into my recovery, and we sort of bonded, I guess.”

Robby’s expression relaxed. His eyes widen in that way when he’s not really sure what to say. Those rare moments when he’s caught off guard.

“I see.”

Langdon’s head starts to put the pieces together. He actually can’t believe what he’s seeing. Another step behind Robby’s walls.

“Were…were you *jealous*?”

Robby shrugs, but they both know that just points in the affirmative.

“Wow.” He leans back on the bench. Basks in this feeling a little longer. It feels undeniably good to feel possessed. Like Robby has some stake in him. “‘fraid she’s going to steal me away?”

Robby looks past him, likely towards McKay. Then, he leans down, bending at the waist until he’s even with Langdon.

“I’m not letting the man I’m seeing get swooped away that easily.”

As Robby pulls back, eyes jutting every which way, he leaves Langdon with a stuttering heartbeat. *Fuck*, being in Robby’s limelight feels amazing, and hearing it directly from him lights him up from the inside out.

He's suddenly not that cold anymore, and his entire body is sparked to life.

"It's good to see this hasn't gone to your head," Robby adds with a roll of his eyes.

A swift presence pops beside him, startling Langdon out of the haze. He looks over to see Harrison leaning in close, arms hanging over the bench. Like mother, like son, he supposes.

"Hey, Frank?"

Langdon looks over to McKay, but she's busy raining praise on Charlotte's drawings. He peers up at Harrison. "What's up?"

"Can we all get lunch? Together?"

"You hungry?" Harrison nods, and Langdon supposes that's as good of an answer from McKay. "Okay, sure. Why not?"

Harrison gleams, popping away just as quickly as he arrived. He looks back up at Robby in time to see him offer a hand up. Langdon lets himself be pulled up and enjoys the seconds of warmth from Robby's hand until they part.

Langdon's taken to walking with Mel to pick up her sister. It's nice downtime between the chaos of the ER and sitting alone at home.

There's not a lot of time for them to chat at work, and he knows Mel likes to talk any chance they get. It's a nice reprieve from having to guess all the time what other people want from him.

Mel has always been easy to be around. Shoulders bumping as they mosey on down the sidewalk.

"I heard you were seeing someone," Mel says, shifting the topic. "That's exciting."

Langdon doesn't raise an eyebrow, because of course Mel is the last one to get to 'hot' gossip that was circulating weeks ago.

He idly wonders who she heard it from, because he knows she isn't someone who seeks out drama with purpose.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's nice."

“What’s she like? Or—I shouldn’t assume.”

And, maybe he’s still kind of hung up about his sexuality, because he’s not sure if he should be correcting her or not. It’s just *Mel, goddamnit,* but her impression of him and his honesty with her actually means a lot to him so he says,

“Actually, it’s…I have a boyfriend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry for assuming. That’s really amazing!”

Langdon tries not to let the awkward moment heat his face. He really thinks maybe he should start believing in a higher being and hope that she doesn’t start to think to tell him it’s okay to be gay—or bisexual.

Or whatever he is. There hasn’t been a label he’s exactly put to it yet.

And, yes, he *knows* that it’s okay. Just didn’t think in all his years of dating women that it would apply to him.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t—haven’t really told anyone, so….”

“It’s safe with me. I won’t tell anyone." She pauses before adding, "Thank you for telling me, though.”

“We've gotten pretty chummy. There's a lot of secrets between us."

Mel giggles, surely thinking back on when she had accepted a patient's granola bar after her stomach had growled in the silent room. That story is locked tight in Langdon's mind.

They walk a few more steps laughing. It’s when they move past the pizzeria place they ate at once with Becca that Mel speaks up.

“Could I meet him one day? I’m just curious.”

He could say, *‘actually, you do know him, and surprise, he’s your boss! He’s my boss, too, and we haven’t discussed what that means at all, and I think he's trying to avoid that conversation all together.’*

That would be a really stupid thing to say, so instead, Langdon says… nothing. Though, the actually correct thing to say doesn’t come to mind. But like a swift pick up in wind, there’s a race of thoughts whirling around in his mind. Robby’s hiding him away, or he’s just some secret toy, or that Langdon’s just making a fool of himself tripping over a man that doesn’t give a damn about him—

“You don’t have to answer,” Mel assures. “I understand if you want to keep it private.”

All Langdon can do is smile with a defeated nod.

"One day," he promises. He doesn't like the fact it sounds skeptical. It's worse that he's not surprised at his own doubt.

Langdon’s conversation with Mel brings up a point he hadn’t really considered. Never had much time to consider either in between shifts at the Pitt, figuring out his post-residency plans, involving himself more in his children’s lives, attending NA meetings and talking with his therapist and sponsor—

He has a lot on his plate. Maybe jumpstarting a relationship with Robby before properly laying out a plan wasn’t the smartest decision, but Robby’s just too enticing.

When dating women, Langdon knows the rules. Shower them with compliments. Don’t be afraid to show them off. Unprotected sex is a no-go.

(He ignores the fact that the last rule was more so to prevent the spread of STIs and children. And, well, Langdon doesn’t have any STIs, at least, and he doesn't have to worry about that second part anymore. Already happened and all that.)

What are the rules for dating a man…as a man? Is he supposed to do those same things? It’s been a long time since he’s been a novice at something, and usually, he’d be asking Robby. Like performing his first laparotomy.

Except, this isn’t some emergency room technique. This is Langdon’s dating life, *damnit*. He’s seeing *Robby* of all people too.

He has always had so much to prove to Robby. First, his intelligence. Then, his innocence and penance.

Now, it’s his respect and admiration.

He starts by using the same techniques he typically would pursue anyone else. Because Robby’s just a normal human being.

At least, that’s what he assumed.

His first step is to…well, shower him in compliments. It’s met with a

dubious look and an even more perplexed smirk. Like he can't fathom Langdon would have a reason to call Robby funny and intelligent.

It does feel strange deliberately finding moments to flirt with him. Not exactly forcing the compliment but more so bringing it up more often than he used to. Like he's tipsy and spilling out every thought that crosses his mind.

They walk out together from their shift, ranting once again about Gloria's unwanted interference.

"You looked good doing that," Langdon mentions, off-handedly.

"Doing what?" Robby asks.

"Telling Gloria to fuck off."

"I didn't say that."

"You practically did."

Truly, he hadn't. Robby's too polite for that. Langdon watched from across the main room as Robby sent the nurses onto Gloria.

They had their (reasonable) complaints about cutting hours despite the shortage. She had shot back with something regarding excessive overtime usage in a much more diplomatic manner than Langdon can recall.

All he remembers clearly is Robby's smirk hiding behind a heavy hand as he watched the nurses lay into Gloria.

Robby grins, then shakes his head as if to get rid of it. "And you thought I looked *good* during that?"

"Don't sell yourself short, handsome. You *always* look good."

Even with winter ending, there's still a chill to the air that makes him bundle up. He starts to think that's the reason for the red crawling to Robby's face before it hits him.

"You like that?" Langdon asks, voice lowering to a drawl.

He had meant it as a joke. Something bordering on corny to get Robby to roll his eyes. Except, Robby doesn't say anything and it's starting to clue him in that maybe 'corny' is working in his favor. He turns his head away and pushes Langdon away. Grinning, Langdon rams his

body into Robby so hard, they both start tripping over their feet.

There's a large palm on his shoulder, shaking him every which way, and Robby's genuinely *flustered*, and Langdon's having a really hard time being normal about it.

"I can talk more about how good you look," Langdon coos under his breath.

Robby's eyes are narrowed, like he wants to chew Langdon out in the middle of the parking lot. Except, when he opens his mouth, a much more feminine voice hollers out.

"Hey!"

They both turn around, eyes wide like two troublemakers caught with hands in the cookie jar. From over his shoulder, Langdon watches Dana catch up with them. Her jacket is zipped up just beneath her chin and bag slung high on her shoulder.

"What are you two—schoolchildren? Quit playin' tag and go home already."

"I was more of a bloody knuckles kid," Langdon replies.

"Yeah, I bet you were. Now, outta my way."

"Bully," Langdon mutters under his breath, but he moves out of the way for Dana to scoot past them.

Actually, it's Robby behind him with a hand still on his shoulder that pulls him back. He looks back at Robby with a flat face, before he explodes into laughter at Robby's guilty, blushing expression.

The next step in his journey of romancing Robby is finding out what exactly he should be doing. Actions speak louder than words and all that. He remembers seducing Abby with dates, flowers, nice gifts. The whole works.

It doesn't flow as smoothly with Robby. The problem is that he doesn't even know where to begin. As much as Robby claims that he's an open book, showcasing his heart on his sleeve, it's got locks and chains keeping it tied shut. He truly doesn't know where to start.

Especially with the day they've had. Robby was more on edge than he's been in a while, blowing past everyone without a second glance.

His commands were snippier, tone clipping and rushed.

Before their relationship blossomed into an actual romance, Langdon would have avoided him. Snickered from a safe distance about how Robby's simply in a mood and moved on with his day.

Things are different now. He's more sensitive to everyone around him now, but his senses are especially attuned to Robby.

At least Dana, or Abbot when he appeared at the end of their shift, were able to get through to him. Robby had at least pretended to listen. He had looked *through* Langdon at basically every interaction. No matter how often he keeps placating himself with the fact that their relationship is still a slow and quiet developing, an unassuming bud of a flower not yet blossomed, it still feels like a betrayal to not be trusted in public. For Robby to not turn to him for assistance.

Even before his leave, Robby would *always* give Langdon the most difficult cases. Would pile his caseload higher and higher, never worrying about whether Langdon had the strength or energy to hold all their patient's lives in his hands. And he would prove himself, yes he would, by working through every case without breaking down, because that's who he was. Someone Robby could *depend on.*

Yet, when they're as attached as they've ever been, Robby has pushed him away. Like two south poles on a magnet repelling each other no matter how close they are smushed together.

The shitshow of a day makes him fumble and stutter when he asks:

"Hey, how come we haven't been on a date?"

It comes out angry and choppy. The oddity of his tone must be what makes Robby peek up from his book. Langdon's own harshness grates his ears.

Robby grunts. "You want to go on a date?"

"I mean. That's what people seeing each other do."

There's a tension building in the room that Langdon notices was not there before. Robby suddenly feels miles away.

Robby clears his throat. "I was waiting."

"Until…?"

“Your residency is up in a few months.”

Langdon raises an eyebrow. His face twists with frustration. “Yeah? So —”

“I wouldn’t be your boss, anymore.”

“I don’t get it.”

Robby looks at him from over his glasses. He starts to talk slowly. “I am in charge of overseeing your residency. You’re my responsibility, and pursuing this…thing between us could damage the constraints of your contract.”

Langdon freezes. “You think us dating’s going to…what? Jeopardize my stipulations of returning to the Pitt?

Robby's eyes narrow, head jutting down like Langdon's the fool for not understanding.

“I’m not going to be the thing that ruins your recovery.”

He starts to stand. Backs away like maybe looking at all of Robby will let him see the bigger picture. They stare at each other like they’re playing a round of tug-of-war.

“So, you tell me you want to see where this goes just to stop it from going anywhere? You couldn’t have waited maybe?” Langdon snarls, because *what the fuck.*

As if Langdon doesn't have control over himself. That he's *that* dependent on Robby's influence.

"You’re twisting my words.”

Anger rallies in his blood, ramping up his heart. “You’re blaming me for this?”

“There's nothing to be at fault for here, Frank.”

Langdon throws his arms in the air. “Then, why are we waiting?!”

Robby motions for him to come closer with two fingers. It’s obscene, but not as pathetic as how quickly Langdon folds. Even under all his frustration and rage, he's a man who will follow Robby's commands.

Robby pats the cushion beside him, and Langdon obeys. Sits with his

side leaning into the back of the couch. He at least places himself far enough away to keep his hands away.

“Do you like when I’m your boss?” Robby asks softly.

As much as he wants to punch Robby right now, it’s hard imagining a world where he isn’t under Robby’s guiding hand. So, Langdon nods.

“I want to continue being your boss. You’re a good student, and I like watching you grow. Can’t do that if this gets…sticky.”

“It’s a little too late for that, Robby.”

Robby sighs. It's an exhausted and long exhale like they've been over this before.

“You need to trust me," Robby says.

“Why?” Langdon mutters, and that single word gives him a sense of power that breaks through the nerves.

He’s never had a problem following Robby’s orders before, but maybe he’s changed. Not some guileless dog without a backbone. He needs stability too. Can’t keep balancing off of Robby’s whims forever.

Slowly, like he’s approaching a rabid animal, Robby pushes a warm hand past Langdon’s parted legs. Feels up Langdon’s chest and grips his shoulder. He shakes Langdon slightly like an old friend.

“Because I’m not done with you.”

Langdon sighs too, but it’s a dreamy, wet thing. His shaky hand grips at Robby’s wrist.

“When will you be done with me?" Langdon argues. This voice is unfamiliar to his own ears, but the bite his voice has reminds him he deserves an answer to this. This has been building for too long to not get one. "When are you going to get rid of me? Don’t do this to me if you’re not serious.”

Some realization crosses Robby’s face. He leans in and kisses him. It feels like a goodbye, and *fuck*, he’s such an asshole. Langdon still chases him after Robby pulls back. It's instinct.

The hand on his shoulder grips at his chest. Langdon lets himself be pushed into the cushions. As his eyelids grow weary and blink slowly, Robby crowds his vision, hovering over him.

A single tear falls down the far corner of his eye. Robby leans his arm on his chest to cradle Langdon's cheek. Turns his head and—*please don't*—he kisses the damp trail his tear leaves behind.

"You're cruel, Robby," Langdon mumbles. "Hanging me up like this."

He wants to deck Robby so fucking hand. Show him even a speck of the cruelty Robby's devoting to him. Then, Robby turns his head, so they're facing each other, and he's smiling, and it's the kindest he's ever looked, and Langdon's lost between his own desires and Robby's beaming, shimmering eyes.

"Frank."

Langdon pushes two hands to his face. He needs to shroud himself. Protect what's left before Robby shatters him. *Fuck*, Robby is a haunted man for pulling him along like this. Teasing out feelings he didn't even know he had.

"You listening?" Robby softly asks.

Langdon nods. The palm on his cheek pats him twice before it moves down, holding his chest. It's heavy, unmovable. Like all the textbooks Robby has ever plucked through during his years of training sit on his chest.

"Do you think I'd hold you like this, if I was just going to leave?"

Yes, and he says as much, because he's done it once before, with that stupid sabbatical, and he's not afraid to do it again and leave Langdon to clean up this mess once Robby ruins him for good.

"What do you need from me?" Robby asks.

Langdon throws his arms over his eyes. It's embarrassing, and Robby's making him do this, but, *fuck*, they need to have this conversation because he—

"Need you to show me," Langdon snivels.

Suddenly, like a typhoon, the words come rushing out.

"I need you to show me. I don't—don't care how you do it. Just show me this—*fuck you*." Langdon takes a shaky breath. Takes a minute to dig his balls into his eye sockets. Absorb the moisture building there. "Fuck. I need to know that this means as much to you as it does to

me.”

Robby’s seeped into every part of his life. There’s little reminders everywhere, from his kids talking about Doll to McKay begging for updates about them to the empty feeling he has when he sits at home wondering what Robby’s doing and feeling like maybe texting him would be too much—

“I need—let me in.” Langdon jumps up, pushing them back to sitting. Their legs tumble together as they sit up. “Stop hiding from me. Trust runs both ways, and I want you to want to come to me. I can’t keep running to you like some lost dog.”

Robby opens his mouth, but Langdon apparently isn’t done. He tackles more onto his conditions.

“And don’t say that you do those things. You *don’t*, and you and I both know it. You always want people to come to you, and talk about how healthy that is, but you never do the same to anyone else.”

Two hands cup Langdon’s cheeks. Robby runs a thumb over the splotches of dampness all around his face. He shivers as his cool fingers brush at his heated features.

“Say something,” Langdon mutters.

Despite all the rage and humiliation, he curls into the palm on his cheek. Feels his mouth brush against the warmth, and there’s a shake to Robby’s hand. Like he’s itching to run.

“I hear you. I’m…I will show you. I don’t know what that means, but whatever that it looks like…I’m okay with that.”

“You’re full of shit,” Langdon murmurs.

“Frank,” Robby whispers. “I’m not going anywhere. I just want to take it slow.”

All his energy bleeds out, seeping from his face to Robby’s palms. The hands around his face squeeze tight. His cheeks probably look ridiculous all squished up like this.

“I’m taking my time with you,” Robby purrs.

Langdon sniffles. Licks at his bottom lip. "And I’m supposed to just… trust you?”

“Isn’t that what you asked me to do?”

He feels himself get weighed down. (It's not Robby. His hands are still cupping his face, keeping the fractured parts stuck together). Their past lays heavy on his shoulders, and it’s always been difficult to move through that, but now he’s truly wading in the depths of their shared history.

“I won’t forgive you,” Langdon barks suddenly. It's loud and bounces off Robby's face from how close he is.

He leaves it open for interpretation, because he can’t even vocalize the possible scenarios that would completely shatter him.

If Robby disappears again. If he keeps him at some distance and never lets him back in. If he starts doubting him and his recovery. If he doubts that they’re going to make it.

Whatever it is, Langdon won’t stand for it. He’s worked too hard to get to this point. He'll help Robby climb up from whatever mess he's found himself in, but he will *not* let him be pulled down. Will never forgive himself for twisting this beautiful thing between them into something ugly and unmentionable.

Robby must understand, because he gives him a single nod. He sinks into the corner of the couch, and he almost looks small. Like a scared animal scrunching in on itself to disappear from its predator’s line of sight.

“You really wanna be seen with me?” Robby asks.

Langdon raises an eyebrow, mostly because that question doesn’t really make sense. They’re seen together all the time at work. Langdon’s practically glued to Robby’s hip everywhere he goes.

It also makes it sound as though they’re doing something scandalous. Which—yeah, now that Robby points it out, they sort of are.

No one in the department truly cares about employee dating, but there’s a very vivid and real imagery in Gloria carrying both of their decapitated heads if she found out about them. He hadn’t really thought about those sorts of logistics. That’s more of Robby’s realm.

“What do you mean?” Langdon says just for clarification. Robby needs to use his own words too, because if this is going to work, he knows that Robby can't keep avoiding him.

His legs have found their way back into Robby's lap, and Robby's curling a gentle hand around his ankle. His thumb is massaging the arch of his foot like he's mindlessly petting the handle of a tea cup.

Like magnets that can't resist the pull of the opposing magnetic fields. That would be going against their very nature.

"You're okay with people knowing that you're dating an old geezer like me?"

Maybe it's the light joke in Robby's depreciation or Langdon's own exhaustion, but he curls himself close. Robby pulls him closer despite his own reservations, hand heavy on the back of his neck.

"I like you, Robby. I'll say it as many times as you need me to."

Robby nods, and for once, Langdon thinks he's actually convinced him of something. Then, he adds, head bowed down, "I like you too."

He tries hard to keep the grin off his face, but the raised eyebrow he gets from Robby tells him that he didn't do that great of a job. It's really hard when Robby's simple little confession has him feeling like he's having the first crush of his entire life. Everything is so new when it's coming from him.

"Yeah?" Langdon's voice wavers, and damn all of Earth if either of them point it out. Maybe Robby can feel his nerves vibrate in his neck with his solid grip, and he looks up at Langdon with eyes that are stronger than Langdon had been expecting.

"I don't think I could stay away from you. I've never met anyone as...captivating as you."

Fuck.

For all the chasing that Langdon's done over the years, it finally feels like he's caught up. His view is clear of Robby's back. In fact, when he turns around in his mind, Robby's right there, following along.

It feels fucking incredible to not be in an eternal chase for Robby's crumbs of attention.

"You don't mind being with a *young man* like me?"

Robby sighs, deep and something from his gut that has Langdon giddy.

“Is reminding me of our age difference funny to you?” Robby grumbles.

Langdon has to bite his lip to keep his own amusement at bay. “Actually it turns me on a little.”

The shock on Robby’s face is as glorious as how quickly it flushes like he’d just announced that over the hospital’s speaker system. Robby’s mouth stammers open, trying to figure out what to say, and Langdon lavishes in the upper hand he’s achieved.

He managed to tamper down his glee with a simple smile, and he's moved past his own shock at his definite enjoyment about all this. It's a lot easier to handle when it's Robby having the difficult time wrapping his head around their differences. Makes being a shithead to Robby much easier too.

“Kids these days,” Robby mutters. He wipes a hand over his face, carding through the tiny strands of hair on top.

“I don’t know how many times I need to say this, but I’m thirty-three.”

Robby’s face contorts again, and it’s like he had said he was some fresh-faced twenty year old in undergrad. Maybe at Robby’s age, everyone under fifty is a youngster who doesn’t know how to work a rotary phone or had missed out on all the “good music.”

His playlist works perfectly fine for him, thank you very much.

Though it is hitting Langdon that at some point—because he really does see a future with Robby where they bicker over the music in the car when he’s dropping his kids off to middle school—that he’s going to have to introduce Robby to his parents.

Or at least reintroduce, because they’ve already met Robby once before. Right after his intern year, but that was a stretch of time ago. They at least heard updates from him about how Robby was *‘such a great teacher and a really funny dude'* and someone he was *‘so glad to work under.’*

And now, he’s getting worked under Robby in so many different ways, and he hopes his parents' heads don’t spin when they realize their son's partner is only a few years shy of their own age.

Not only that, but Robby’s a man. His parents were never homophobic, always supporting Langdon as their only son to pursue

whatever he wanted. On the other hand, the idea that their womanizing and coy frat son who had settled down more so out of necessity is actually in a committed relationship with a man much older than him is….

It’s hard to predict their reaction, even mentally.

Maybe the realization is showing on his face or they have both come to the same conclusion, because Robby’s narrowing his eyes at him. Like he knows Langdon’s brain is traveling in ten different directions at lightning speed like always.

“Don’t worry about it,” Robby says. His hand begins to knead at the muscle between his neck and shoulder, and it’s easy to fall into his words. “We’ll figure it out.”

It’s daunting and startling new and he’s wrung himself dry this entire evening with his bittersweet pleas and needs.

For once though, Langdon feels as if they’re on the same page. They’re both terrified, but he feels Robby grip onto harder like he’s the life vest that will get them to shore. It’s encouraging to feel that Robby isn’t ready to let go of this and drown himself in his own woes alone.

Chapter End Notes

> it's sort of hard writing robby having an emotional conversation knowing he's like the world's biggest avoidant. as soon as he gets emotional, he dips. i can change him though guys i promise.....
>
> but yeah, it's hard to accurately characterize robby when we've only seen 15 hours of him and he was at like his lowest point in life LOL. maybe season 2 will be better for you buddy (it won't be.)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> i know y'all caught that tag change, but if you didn't, slight NSFW incoming :)

After the night that Langdon's been naming the 'Big Bang' due to explosion of his own emotions, Langdon thought he would be wound up. That their argument would coil his skin tight like a wet rag and force him to walk on eggshells until time smoothes out their battle wounds.

Instead, it's freed him from his insecurities. Either they make it, or they don't, and Langdon's never been one to not believe in his own success. He's always up for a challenge.

He wonders if his own relaxed mood is helping Robby ease into a sense or normalcy as well.

At work, they interact just like before—*before* he had taken those pills and tried treating his own withdrawal and Robby had shut him out of his life. *Before* realizing that communication was vital, and that he shouldn't be guessing Robby's thoughts and wants.

Langdon still acts like a pain in the ass, zipping from patient to patient. Robby rolls his eyes and grumbles about how Langdon actually *is* a pain in the ass.

Robby's not shy with his praise though. His *'good work'*s and *'nicely done'*s fall from his lip like it's second nature, because it used to be, a long time ago. And Langdon's not even surprised to hear how well he's doing, because he is one of the best doctors here.

What's different is that when he does meet Robby's eyes, they're hungry. And Robby's actually looking at him instead of through him. There's a fire burning in how he looks at Langdon that's almost distracting.

Almost.

Again, he's a brilliant doctor who could work through the eye of a hurricane. The only sweat he'd break is from his naturally humid disposition.

Another improvement he notices is that Robby seeks him out first instead of the other way around. Like their conversation gave him permission to be needy.

Langdon had scrolled through their text and call history and realized with dismay that he was initiating most of their interactions. Now, though, as Langdon reads with glee bubbling in his chest, Robby texts him quite often.

Well, as often as an exhausted ER attending can text. He still nearly passes out in a semi-conscious daze when he gets home from especially difficult days, pretending that he isn't falling asleep on Langdon's couch.

But, on Robby's free days, he sends Langdon lots of pictures. Captionless pictures that Langdon has to decipher what he's being shown exactly. The novelty of the whole situation endears him enough to spend five minutes zooming into each unfocused picture.

He's leaned up against the nurse's station, elbows propped on the counter like some bored kid lacking manners at the dinner table. Langdon squints at the latest picture Robby has sent him.

It's an ordinary photo, really, but it puts a number to Robby's age, because only someone in their fifties would send slightly cryptic, contextless pictures. It's *Langdon's* who is strange for being so endeared regardless.

He's outside on the backyard porch. It stands high enough to capture the sunset happening in the background. Closer to the camera, Doll's out-of-focused face shines up at Robby. Her tail is a blurry mess of lines, presumably from wagging so fast like a goddamn propeller.

At the bottom of the picture, Robby's single hand is clutched around the tops of his book, title peeking out from behind his thick forearm.

It's mouthwatering, and embarrassingly so, how just the sight of his big hand does it for him.

McKay sidles up beside him, a line of heat to his left. She stares up at the board, humming to herself, before her eyes lock onto him.

"What's got your attention?" McKay asks. She thinks she's being discreet enough to hide her interest, but Langdon can read the intrigue in her voice alone.

Langdon slides the phone over. He makes sure to tap on the photo, so no one can read over his shoulder and see how the message is from.

“I’m trying to figure out why I got this photo sent to me.”

“Because it’s a nice thing to share things with people?”

“Yeah, I got that part.” Langdon looks around before leaning in closer. “Look—Robby will send me pictures, and usually it’s about one specific thing, but I can’t tell what he’s focusing on with this one.”

“Let me see.”

Langdon passes the phone to her. She zooms out and holds the phone out at a distance like Robby does when he doesn’t have his reading glasses.

“You know, if you finally bought yourself a pair of glasses—”

“Zip it, or I’m not helping you with this.”

Langdon holds his hands up and lets McKay finish her investigation. After a few more seconds, she hands the phone back, diagnosis made.

“It’s the sunset,” she announces.

He looks at the picture again with a raised eyebrow. That doesn’t really sound right, and when he steps back mentally, he knows this isn’t that big of a deal.

On the other hand, he can tell Robby is putting genuine effort into branching the communication between them. It’s only fair that Langdon does the same.

Javadi bounds over. “Are we handing cases over to the night shift?”

“Uhhh, yeah, in a minute,” McKay says.

“Hey,” Langdon says. He shows the phone to Javadi, and her eyes nearly burst out of her head. “What do you think is the main point of this photo?”

Her shoulders hunch forward as she narrows into the phone. “Who sent you this?”

“That’s not relevant.”

She raises an eyebrow before zoning back into the picture. Her hand goes to her mouth, thinking. He appreciates the sincerity she seems to carry with her everywhere.

“Uhm, how long ago was this sent?”

“Like ten minutes? I don’t know.”

“May I?” She asks. Langdon nods and hands the phone over. Her fingers zoom in and out before making her judgement call. “I think it’s the dog?”

“What makes you say that?” He asks.

“Well, it’s looking up at the camera in a really funny way. Looks pretty cute. The person probably wanted to show that to you.”

Langdon looks at the photo again. Doll’s face is blocked by part of Robby’s knee, the rest of her adorable mug out-of-focus. He’s not sure that’s the right answer either, even if he knows Robby’s grown fond of her.

Like clockwork, another person shows up behind him. He turns for more input, but his mouth stops when he spots who joins them.

“Looks like a party up here,” Collins says slowly.

McKay has the decency to look caught. She holds a hand to Javadi’s shoulder to ask, “how are those lab results?”

“Uhh—yeah. They’re good.” Her eyes widen as she stumbles on her words. “Not *good*, but you know, it gives us a diagnosis.”

McKay nods. “Great! Let’s go tell the patient.”

She pushes them down the nurse’s station. Her eyes hone into Langdon, and she makes a phone gesture with her thumb and pinkie.

Collins watches them leave with a raised eyebrow. She looks back at him, and for one bizarre moment, Langdon’s thinking about the fact they’ve both imagined Robby naked. *Just another thing they can bond about,* he thinks with some snide humor.

Before he lets doubt consume him, Langdon shows the photo to Collins.

“Why do you think I got sent this photo?”

Collins takes one long look at the picture. She zooms out with two fingers before looking up at him.

“Ask about the book.”

Langdon feels his face contort. “Seriously?”

“You asked for my advice, and now you’re doubting me? Pick a side.”

He rolls his eyes, but he begins to type his message. His fingers hover over the screen before he hits ‘send’.

Langdon [6:40 PM]: How’s the book?

The thought bubble at the bottom of the screen is almost immediate. Langdon looks at Collins, and she must sense his nerves. She smirks, mischievous and kind in equal parts.

Robby [6:41 PM]: a lot better than i thought

Robby [6:41 PM]: will tell more when youre home.

“Wow,” Langdon mumbles. A double text is rare. Like seeing a double rainbow. Or a four-leaf clover. Or any other naturesque sign of good luck.

“Told ya,” Collins teases as she walks away. “Start handing your cases off to the night shift.”

“Yeah,” he says in a daze. Then, snapping out of it, Langdon shouts. “Thank you!”

Collins waves a hand, taking her victory lap around the ER. He’s not sure why he hesitated. She’s always been right on the mark about people and that includes Robby.

“Okay, on my count. One, two, three—”

They—’they’ being Robby, Mohan, Langdon, Whittaker, Princess, and two EMTs—crowd into the trauma room and lift the gurney onto the table.

Langdon feels a snap of pain in his spine. With a hiss, he freezes and runs a palm up his back. He looks up to see Robby doing the same thing.

“Oh brother,” Garcia snorts as she moves past the running EMTs.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” Langdon grumbles.

“Looks like two retired doctors wandered their way in here,” Garcia teases.

Robby stands with his hands tucked under his arms. “I must be hearing things, because I think you just called me old.”

“Bad hearing in the elderly is common,” Garcia fires back, smooth as ever. Langdon starts grinning, but she turns to him and bumps him down the table. “I’m talking to you too, grandpa.”

Someone must have paged surgery when the call came in. Langdon steps out of the way and stands beside Robby. They both look rather pathetic, sidelined with back pain.

“Doctor Mohan, you got this?” Robby asks, but he’s inching towards the exit anyway.

“Yeah,” she answers, quickly. “You should go grab an icy-hot.”

“Hot packs are for the weak,” Robby roars, backing into the door. “Come find me with any updates.”

Langdon lets himself slip out with Robby. As they sanitize their hands, Robby asks in a low voice, “you okay?”

He raises an eyebrow, a smile twitching on his lips. “What happened to hot packs being for the weak?”

“I wasn’t talking about you,” Robby murmurs, rather ambiguously.

He doesn’t let Langdon dwell on the off-handed comment. Just curls two fingers in the air and leads them to the break room.

“Sit,” Robby orders.

It’s ridiculous, really. It was just a muscle pull, but Robby’s insistence is endearing, so Langdon obeys with a huff.

“Please don’t tell me this is some lingering guilt about my first back injury,” Langdon teases.

The pause Robby takes starts to concern him. A silence weighs over them, and Langdon’s about to open his mouth, because *no way* they’re

having this same old argument, but then Robby exhales. It's heavy and weary.

"No, I've made amends with that. Speaking of…."

Langdon stares at his back as Robby sighs. His shoulders jut down, along with his head and his vision, as Robby stares at the counter. Into the open cabinet, he confesses:

"I'm proud of you. I know recovery isn't always the smoothest process, and I didn't make it easy for you when I first came back. You're doing really well, and I don't think I've told you as much."

"Okay," Langdon says.

Robby raises an eyebrow, and the look clues him into the fact that maybe his brain is short circuiting saying things without his permission, but *holy shit*. It's everything he's ever wanted to hear, and it's happening on a random Tuesday in the hospital's breakroom.

"I mean—yes. That means a lot, Robby. Thank you. Really."

They stare at each other as Robby nods. After a moment, Langdon adds, "I'm really happy too."

Robby smiles, and Langdon thinks he hears the meaning behind those words. That part of his joy is Robby's fault.

He coughs into his hand. "Uhm, so this is…?"

Robby raises an eyebrow over his shoulder. With his arm in the cabinet, he says, "I can't take care of you?"

Heat slams into his stomach, and it all marches south. He plays with his lip, rolling it between his teeth.

Langdon wets his tongue. "If you want."

"I do."

Robby slides the pill bottle across the table. He takes four of the ibuprofen pills and hands it back. The bottle gets exchanged with a hot pack.

Langdon stares down at the hot pack like he's never seen it before. His palm starts sweating with the buildup of heat.

“You put that on your back,” Robby comments with a smirk.

“Yeah, thanks,” he grumbles, but his brain catches up to the program and presses the pack against the ache in his spin. Exhales an uneasy breath he hadn't realized he was holding in.

“Sit. Breathe. I’ll come find you in a few minutes.”

Robby leaves so quickly that Langdon’s thoughts all slip out with him. He’s warm all over from being doused in Robby’s concern.

Fuck.

He’ll get Robby back for this.

Eventually. Just let him soak in this for a few minutes.

“Langdon.”

“Mmmm.”

He doesn’t remember falling asleep, but he must have. A broad hand shakes him. Langdon peels his eyes open and looks over his shoulder.

Robby stands over the bed. He’s dressed like he’s going to work. Jacket zipped up, travel mug streaming on the bedside table, aviators tucked into his collar.

“Issit Thursday?” Langdon mumbles. He stretches up to change, because he's not sure how he slept through their collective seven alarms, but Robby flattens his palm on Langdon’s chest, pushing him back down into the mattress.

“No. I was called in. Collins had an emergency.”

Langdon's eyes cut open. The light’s an assault on his vision, and he clamps them shut. “She OK?”

“Yep. She’s alright.”

His senses are all muddled, but the warmth of Robby’s hand feels really good. He lets himself sink into that heat, curling into the heat. Robby’s fingers massage the muscle of his arm.

“‘kay, have fun then,” he mutters.

Langdon paws around Robby's chest, gripping his shirt. Pulls Robby in for a kiss on his mouth. They stay mouth-to-mouth, just breathing for a second, before Langdon falls back into the sheets.

"Love you," Langdon whispers.

The presence in the room lingers. Langdon peeks an eye open to find Robby motionless beside the bed. He's staring down at him with wide eyes like a deer in headlights.

"Go," Langdon grumbles, "you'll be late."

A large hand ruffles through his hair. Langdon swats it away, because he's not some dog, and curls further into the sheets. The soft click of the door shutting is the last noise he hears before he falls into a deep slumber.

His words follow him into his sleep, and he wakes up half an hour later in a panic. He digs around for his phone. To call Robby, apologize, say that he didn't mean that except he totally, deep down, meant all of it and more that he's too terrified to say.

There's a single text on his lock screen.

Robby [6:42 AM]: you too

He plants his bag at the table and shrugs off his jacket. It was a hell of a day, but it's over. For Langdon, at least. He knows Robby will still be at the ER for another hour or two.

When Langdon was waiting outside the ER, he grew tired and called Robby. Robby, how dare he, had the audacity to send him straight to voicemail with a text:

Robby [7:12 PM]: wont be done for while. head home without me

Langdon had pocketed his phone with a grumble, but heading home sounded appealing enough to set aside that frustration. Even if that leaves him with the mental image of Robby, scrubs and all, holding control over the ER near the end of their demanding shift.

Fuck, working with Robby will always get his blood rushing. Nothing compares to being under his mentorship. Learning a new technique and seeing Robby in action, hands working quick and steady with years of proficiency will never fail to do Langdon in.

Long ago, the hammering in his stomach was just idol worship. Seeing a master in his craft and getting to learn from the best of the best.

Now, Langdon acknowledges as he sheds his shirt, that passion has transformed into another beast entirely. Like adding a few limbs and organs to that monster called *'passion'* that's actually just a longing to be worked under those same hands.

His core tightens as Langdon strips out of his scrub bottoms. The boxers stay on. They give him something to rut up against uselessly as he crawls into his bed.

It's easy to let the blood flow south when he's been keyed up all day. He's been on edge for nearly twelve hours. Cut him some slack. Plus, he's been letting himself hang off this cliff all day. Work his shift, came home and fed himself.

Satiated in all ways but sexually.

His mind wanders to its usual, dangerous territory as his hand wanders over his boxers. Feels the cheap material stretch across his lap as he feels himself growing harder.

It's a slow build of tension in the pit of his stomach. Like the rising strain of muscles after a long run. His legs go stiff as he works himself up into the curve of his palm.

He thinks about Robby leaning behind him. Replacing Langdon's hand with his own. Or even covering his hand with his and showing Langdon how to properly get off.

'Like this,' Robby would say.

He'd teach him the correct way. Demonstrate new techniques that would have Langdon's mouth pooling with saliva. Point out hidden spots that have him rutting into Robby's demanding hand.

His eyes clamp shut. Where he leaks on the front of his boxers dampens his hand. He's too worked up to care about ruined fabric, and he shoves the stupid things down. They barely make it past his midthigh before he palms at his dick again.

The direct stimulation causes a shiver to run through his body. The idea of *Robby* being the one to push his boxers aside to really see him is what gets his hips stuttering as he fucks into his own palm.

Imaging sex with Robby has always been difficult. His lack of experience with men means he's drawing from online databases. Other people's experiences to give him some insight.

Pornography. He means porn. Sometimes it's forums for men, but it's mostly porn.

It was never really his thing. Even now that he's watching two men go at it, he doesn't see the appeal, and the gimmicky faces they make makes him grimace and close out of the tab. The poses certainly serve as fuel for his rabid imagination.

Like now, thinking about Robby pushing him onto the bed. One hand is flat on his chest, keeping him pinned there with hushed strength. Another hand curling around his thigh and pushing it up, up, up until his ankles wrapped around his shoulder.

He thinks about Robby with that strong hand on his chest. Propping himself up with a muscled arm. That hand would feel him up, try to touch every part of him.

The flashing hot memory from months ago when Robby had not-so accidentally brushed against his nipple strikes again. It's such a powerful moment, and Langdon feels his own hand try to recreate the movement.

Instead of that same electrifying spike, Langdon only feels disappointed. It's not the same at all. It's a tickle compared to the rush of pleasure that Robby's hand brought.

Part of him truly doesn't understand, not fully yet, how he would find himself in this position.

The Langdon in his head pleading for Robby to ruin him. To use him any way he can and reach into those spots he only has experience with in medical textbooks.

And he's seen it in the videos. How the ones on the bottom react when that spot is hit. He wonders if that spot will have him arching off the sheets, or if it will be solely by Robby's hand on his cock that will get him the most riled up.

Langdon feels his stomach clench. His telltale signs of climax. His hand works over his cock faster, slippery with precum. Rolling his bottom lip between his teeth, he stifles a moan.

There's no one to be quiet for, but he imagines Robby propping his mouth open with a thumb. Sucking on that digit as he says, *'be good and loud for me. I want to hear you.'*

It's Robby's command in his head that sends him. Pleasure crashes through his body as he comes across his stomach. His palm works over his cock slower.

The Robby in his head licks him clean, and it's the adoration of it all points to the thing Langdon's missing the most.

He needs to see Robby in action. Nothing in his imagination could compare to this world's Robby.

Langdon's glad he walks past one of the central rooms at the moment he does. If he had been even a few seconds early or late, he would have missed the elderly woman with memory impairment socking Robby in the stomach.

It takes a few nurses to calm her down. Identify any potential stressors and talk her down first before trying medication. Langdon doesn't see the rest of their efforts as he escorts a hunched over Robby out of the room.

He pulls Robby into the bathroom. Checks every stall and sees they're alone.

"I'm fine," Robby insists.

That usually means something isn't fine. Their definitions seem to vary.

"Well, I still want to check."

Robby rolls his eyes, but lets himself be crowded against the sink. "What are you going to do? You got a CT scan for eyes now?"

Langdon doesn't let Robby get to him as he unzips his jacket. Moves the two sides apart to hike up his shirt.

"Going to do a hepatic lobectomy right here in the bathroom?"

"You sure are cocky for someone who just got their ass kicked by an eighty-nine year old," Langdon teases.

His hands are cold against the round of Robby's stomach. He eyes the

skin as it moves up and down in fast cycles, like Robby's breathing is picking up. There's a breathy exhale from above.

"She's got dementia. I could take her on any day of the week."

Langdon looks up from his inspection. Raises an eyebrow as he says, "maybe she thought you looked familiar from the retirement home. Have you been stealing the last jello from the buffet line, Mr. Robinavitch?"

"Aren't you cute today."

He laughs. The echo startles him, and he clamps his mouth shut. Takes a second to recover before adjusting his volume.

"I'm cute every day," Langdon coos.

He runs a flat palm over the surface of Robby's stomach. Doesn't let himself get lost in the short curls there.

"I don't know about that," Robby grumbles.

Langdon pokes a finger into the area he thinks Robby got hit. No widened eyes or startled reaction.

"That's not what you told me this morning."

"Frank—"

He pushes only a teensy amount more pressure on a different area. The hiss that slides out confirms his answer.

"On a scale from one to ten?"

"You're such a shithead."

Langdon grins, moving his hand away. He fixes Robby's shirt and flattens the material. As he begins to zip the jacket back up, he peaks around one last time before pushing up on his toes and pulling Robby in by the stethoscope.

Robby's eyes are narrowed, like he'd seen this coming. He can't see his face at all as he tugs him into a kiss.

At first, there's a deep grumble against his lips. Like Robby's annoyed. Then, Robby pushes them forward. Rough and taking what he deserves, and Langdon shivers at the thought. His lips curl into

Langdon's mouth, rolling his bottom lip in. The tip of Robby's tongue peaks into his mouth, and Langdon feels himself arch into the firm of Robby's chest.

They stay entangled for what feels like a second before a hand steadies on Langdon's chest and pushes them apart.

"You were right. Nothing seems to be the matter," Langdon diagnoses through a heavy pant.

Robby glares at him. "Who could have figured?"

"I'll have a nurse follow up with you, but for now, I have other patients to save. You know how it is. Healing hands and all that."

Langdon heads towards the exit. Gives a little wave to Robby's grumpy, almost bewildered expression before leaving the bathroom. He hopes his overwhelming glee doesn't show in his step.

There's a weak knock on his door. Langdon almost contemplates not answering, but the game is stuck in a commercial break, so he figures why the hell not.

He pushes himself up and peeks through the hole. It's sort of a stunning sight to see Robby on the other side.

The door swings open. Robby stands with his hands shoved deep into his pockets. The bag from work is slung on one shoulder, his other shoulder hunched forward. His cargo pants and jacket are all wrinkled.

"Hey," Langdon says. Clears his throat. "I didn't get a text from you. Did something happen?"

Robby's staring at some space behind Langdon. He's not sure what, but he does know he's looking anywhere but Langdon's face.

"Remember when you said I should let you in?"

Langdon raises an eyebrow. Robby doesn't finish his sentence, and they stand at his doorway silently. There's a drum of anticipation building in Langdon's gut.

"Technically, I'd be the one letting you in right now," Langdon corrects, cautiously.

“I shouldn't have—”

Langdon grabs Robby by the wrist and pulls him inside the apartment. Cups his face and plants a smacker of a kiss on his cheek. It’s loud enough to cover the sound of the game coming back on.

“I always want you here,” Langdon assures. “You know that, Robby.”

Robby huffs. It’s bitter laughter that Langdon doesn’t want to hear, so he steps further into Robby’s line of sight.

“How many times have I shown up to your house pissed off and bouncing off the walls?”

It gets a tiny scoff out of Robby, but it’s less despairing than his last noise, so Langdon counts it as a win.

“Okay, okay. I get it.”

He leads Robby towards his bedroom to drop his stuff off. Watches Robby change into a spare set of clothes he’s left at Langdon’s place.

Robby seems to find reassurance in Langdon’s presence. Just having him in his vision is enough.

He stays lined up against the wall as Robby pulls on a plain t-shirt. Once he’s done, Langdon shuts the light off and pulls them back into the living room. Pushes Robby to lay on the couch.

“We lost a kid,” Robby explains.

Langdon winces. He used to be better at handling death. His ability to put it all to the side and move on has dropped tremendously after each of his kids were born.

“We lost that kid, and he looked nothing like him, but I got reminded of Tanner, and I flubbed it. I stepped away when they needed me, but I couldn’t stomach it—”

Robby curls into himself, hands hiding the sides of his face. It’s a sickening sight to see. He looks so much weaker this way. Langdon hovers a hand over his back like he could shield Robby from it all. Robby may see it as a patronization.

“I’d…usually would hold on till the weekend.”

“For?”

“Jake and I used to do something every Sunday.”

Jake. Robby still hasn’t been able to reconnect with him. Langdon thinks the last bit of sanity he has left would snap if he wasn’t able to talk to his kids.

Technically, that had already happened, but the pain of withdrawals kept him plenty distracted.

There’s nothing keeping Robby tethered to this present moment. His eyes are narrowed, like he’s still squinting at his watch to call the time of death.

“Do you want to call my kids?” Langdon offers, letting his hand fall away.

“No,” Robby says. It’s an immediate response like he didn't even listen to what he asked. Langdon lets it linger in the air.

“Might make you feel better,” Langdon continues. “I always call them after something like this.”

“Yeah?” Robby asks. He’s quiet, fingers fiddling with something in his pocket. “It help?”

Langdon shrugs. “A little. Want to give it a try?”

Robby looks up at him with big eyes, and he’s always been the worst at asking for help. Like the words physically are trapped in his throat.

“Only a few minutes,” Robby whispers.

He nods and pulls out his phone. Texts Abby a quick explanation that doesn’t give too much of Robby's personal information away.

A minute later, an incoming video call vibrates his phone. He picks up, and Charlotte’s face covers the whole screen.

“Baby, back up,” Langdon says. He adjusts the camera so that both him and Robby are in view.

Charlotte gasps. “Hi, Robby!”

So much for being his biological flesh and blood. He’s yesterday’s trash compared to Robby.

But then, a wavering smile curls at his lips, and maybe Langdon would

accept being the world's largest loser if it meant Robby would smile again.

"Hi, little monkey. What are you doing?"

"It's time for bed."

"Is it now?"

Charlotte nods. They talk back and forth for a few minutes until she yawns. Robby wishes her all the sweetest dreams in the world, and she waves from where she is tucked snug into her bed.

Langdon hangs up the phone, and the silence in the apartment is booming. It's a delicate balance trying to find the right words to keep them moving forward.

"I get it. Whenever we lose a kid, I get so fucking in my head. I know it's not Charlotte or Tanner, but your mind just goes places it knows it shouldn't."

"Do you think I should talk to her?"

"Talk to who?"

"That psychologist."

It takes Langdon several moments to remember what the hell Robby is talking about. A foggy memory from months ago on Robby's couch comes to mind. That white phone card that Robby couldn't even look at.

"Yeah. Could be a good idea."

"Could be?"

Langdon shrugs. "Want me to be an optimist? Never given it a shot, but I could try—"

"No thank you."

He crawls closer on the couch. "You're killing this mental health shit, Robby. I'm *so* proud of you, and you deserve—"

Robby's got one hand curled around Langdon's mouth. His other hand and a strong grimace on his face keeps Langdon back from crawling on top of him.

“Please stop. You sound like Abbot, and I’m going to need a drink if you keep this up.”

Langdon’s got a grin plastered on his face. He catches Robby off guard and licks his palm. The disgusted look Robby gives him twists his stomach in laughter.

With a groan, Langdon stands and rifles through Robby’s bag. Finds his wallet and begins to look for the card he knows Robby stuffed in here long ago. Very like him to pile it down and try to forget.

Robby raises his eyebrows, but there’s an obsessive look in his wide eyes as he looks through his wallet.

He pulls out that eggshell white card he remembers. The edges are bent and there’s a scuff of dirt at the bottom. Flips the card to the e-mail side and hands it to Robby. He stares at the card as if he’s never seen it before.

“If you don’t talk to her now, you’re going to wake up tomorrow and pretend that it’s perfectly normal to have suicidal thoughts after every shift.”

“That’s not true,” Robby argues. When Langdon raises an eyebrow, he adds, “it’s every other shift.”

Likely story, but Langdon still wobbles the card in front of him. Robby hesitates, fresh out of jokes and disputes to prolong the inevitable. His head hangs low as he reaches for the card.

Langdon starts to think he’s going to have to make the appointment for him, which defeats the point, but he watches as Robby types into his phone. His fingers fiddle with the edges like he’s going to fold the thing up and discard it.

Langdon sits back down beside him. Gives him enough room to think. Maybe before, he would have hovered over him, consumed with the idea that Robby’s plagued by something Langdon has no concept of. Obsessed with finding out veiled parts of Robby that he tries so desperately to hide.

And maybe he would have tried to fix those parts too. Being good enough to be a healer of all types of wounds.

He knows that is not true now. They’re both on their own separate journeys.

That doesn't mean he has to let Robby do it alone.

Robby's fingers hover over the keyboard before he must hit submit. He tosses the phone onto the side table and leans back into the cushions like all the energy's been drained from him.

After a few contemplative silences, Robby's head lulls to the side and eyes Langdon up and down.

"Feel better?"

"No."

Langdon huffs. "Yeah. It'll take a while."

Robby nods, sighs a heavy exhale through his nose. With two fingers, Langdon clenches onto his short-sleeve shirt and tugs him towards him. Robby drops onto Langdon's chest.

It's quiet. Entirely too eerie in a room with two mouthy assholes.

He turns his head down and plants a kiss to the top of Robby's head. There's an answering shudder that makes Langdon do it again. And again, slow and leisurely all over the crown of his hair.

Robby curls a hand around his arm. It's tight, and maybe he's going to throw Langdon off and bury into himself, alone. Instead, he just holds Langdon close. As if he can't believe he's there. Needing physical proof that they're sharing this space together.

Langdon cradles him in his arms, tight and sturdy. He's never letting Robby fall, or even let him think he'll ever let go.

"I was telling the truth," Langdon admits.

Robby's dead silent. They've moved to lay across the couch, Robby resting his head on Langdon's chest. His head's heavy in his hands, and he lets his fingers massage his scalp.

"You're good for the ER. We need you there, but you have to take care of yourself too. And I'm here for you. Whenever you want to talk about it—or just have someone. That's something you can want, you know."

The head in his hands digs further into Langdon's chest. Like he's attempting to bury himself away and hide.

That's fine. Langdon will still be here when Robby's ready. He's not going anywhere.

He leans down and presses a kiss into his hairline. It takes him a moment to realize Robby doesn't move, because he's in the middle of falling asleep.

The day's burden weighs him down, but he's clinging onto consciousness. The only sign Langdon has that he's still awake is the miniscule nod he gives Langdon.

After that moment, when the hours blended together into a blur of limbs and exchange of quiet, wordless blessings over the TV's muffled noise, Robby makes himself home at Langdon's apartment.

Langdon notices immediately, in the way he leaves the door unlocked for Robby to let himself in. Robby claims it's unsafe despite doing the same exact thing. So, they meet in the middle, and Langdon gives him the spare key.

He's not sure if Robby's aware of what he's doing, spending most of his free time at Langdon's abode, or if it's just become routine that he refuses to dig deeper into.

Either way, he always makes sure to toe his shoes off beside Langdon's and stuffs his bag into the same chair in the kitchen space.

Robby's belongings find their way into his closets as well. He doesn't notice until one day he pulls on a jacket that feels the slightest bit oversized.

Langdon looks at himself in the mirror and starts thinking that maybe he's lost some weight. It takes Robby commenting on how his clothes look nice on him to realize he hadn't grabbed his own jacket at all.

It happens in the reverse too. Langdon sometimes walks into his apartment to see Robby on the porch, lounging in a chair. The sleeves of *his* jacket are bunched around his elbows as he flips through another page in his book.

Robby has the gall to argue that he's wearing his own jacket. Except, Langdon recognizes the stain at the bottom of the left pocket as a dirt stain he got chasing after Tanner at the park. Despite the irrefutable evidence, Robby doesn't give him the jacket back.

And as the days go by, he watches as more and more of his clothes get

rearranged in his dresser. And more often than not, Robby will try to assert that, *yes, this oversized UPenn t-shirt is mine,* even though they both know he attended WashU.

Which is the shirt that Langdon's currently sporting, and now Robby's put him in the position to defend that *'the WashU campus is just otherworldly, Robby, you just had to be there to see it.'*

When Langdon decides to sprawl across the bed, because it's still his mattress, *thank you very much,* Robby yanks him by the ankles towards the edge of the bed.

"What the hell, man?" Langdon shouts.

"You were on my side," Robby argues with a shrug.

Langdon raises an eyebrow, feeling hope trip up his heart. "We have sides now?"

Robby doesn't get past a grumble before he's passed out on *'his'* side. It's not long before Langdon forgets the moment and his exasperation at Robby's refusal to at least acknowledge it.

Or maybe it's pent-up frustration from having Robby so close in his bed all the time and not doing a damn thing about it.

He can't be too mad. They're both sleeping more than they used to, and it shows. Langdon's able to fire off at work at rates he hasn't seen in years. Robby's more energetic at work too, still goofy and playful with his straight-face and teensy smile.

On the worst days, he's still as bitter and sarcastic and mean. That may just be a chronic condition, but those bad days are few and far between.

When Robby huffs and storms off, Langdon feels entitled enough to catch up with him. Stand by his side and tell him to take a breather. It's a miracle that Robby actually listens.

Once those frustrations have fallen off his shoulder, Langdon tells him what *their* dinner plans are. And Robby doesn't refute or argue. Maybe a muttered *'pasta again? You're losing your touch'* before Langdon silences him with a look. His compliance is an odd thing that Langdon had not anticipated. He didn't expect his own enjoyment of it either.

They're both changing, and it's the first time that Langdon thinks it's a

good thing.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

massive nsfw warning :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His final day at the Pitt comes without an uproar. He wakes up early enough to get his morning workout in before taking a brief shower. Combs quick, product-laced fingers through his hair, knowing it'll dry just as it should by the time he arrives at work.

And when he does get through the ER's doors, he puts his bag and clothes in his locker before swinging by the nurse's station. Dana cracks wise about his eerie morning joy that just no one else seems to really appreciate.

Everyone's always a bummer before noon.

He orders bloodwork and labs, breaks a rib performing CPR, tries to deescalate an agitated patient but only makes it worse with his snide comments.

It's a fairly typical day. Even the part where Robby stands next to him a little too close to call professional. That's all par for the course.

And he's going to miss those tiny bits. The split seconds where their eyes find each other across the room. Passing moments where Langdon succeeds yet again, and Robby praises him with approval and attention.

Before and after that terrible day all those months ago—they both have Robby in common. Robby and his endless selfishness and easy leadership.

It's for different reasons now, of course, that he appreciates those traits in Robby.

As the sun inches closer to the horizon, and the day starts to drag on more, people exchange quick goodbyes with him. Short and simple, like Langdon's not really going to be gone for long.

Just a quick sabbatical and not a whole year at a different hospital for his emergency medicine fellowship.

Tanner's drawing is the last bit of decoration he removes from the inside of his locker. Maybe he'll stick it to his fridge. Or the inside of his bathroom cabinet. Somewhere he'll see bright and early.

He's in the middle of thinking about a sufficient place when Robby leans against the locker beside him.

"So, it's your last day terrorizing us."

Langdon grins, pulling his head out of the locker. "But you're still going to miss me, right?"

Robby props an elbow on the locker. His body casts a shadow over Langdon. "Ohhh, I don't know about that."

Langdon holds back a laugh. He takes the last of his belongings before watching his locker shut for the last time. There's a dreadful bit of nostalgia crawling up his throat.

"A lot of good memories in this hallway."

Robby's mouth is flat as he says, "that's not how I remember it."

He rolls his head to face Robby, tilting his head up. He's feeling risky, like the last day of senior year when none of his exams mattered anymore and med school was already within his grasps.

Langdon curls a hand around Robby's bicep. His fingers squeeze the muscle underneath. It's entertaining to feel the subtle strength lying beneath all his layers. Enough so to distract him from Robby swooping in to plant a kiss on his lips.

It happens right there, in the middle of the hallway, where anyone could be walking by.

Fuck.

"Are you done for the day?" Langdon asks quietly.

Robby doesn't budge from where he's standing. Perched against the lockers with that tiny, victorious smirk.

"Mmhmm."

"Let's go home," Langdon says. He draws out the words, really hoping Robby sees his meaning. That the implication is clear, and that he doesn't make Langdon *beg*.

He's not above it, but Robby must see what he's seeing, because there's a dusting of pink across his cheeks.

"Not yet," Robby says. "I have one more surprise."

He really tries not to show his disappointment, but Robby's leading him out of the ER by the hand, and that's enough to leave his worries behind.

Once they get to the parking lot, Robby tosses him a helmet. It's a nice thing to see that Robby's not riding around without one now, because he puts his own helmet on too.

He watches Robby mount the motorcycle. The confidence he has working around the bike shouldn't be so alluring, but like a siren call, Langdon follows, swinging a leg over the seat behind him.

That first, and only, time he had been on Robby's bike is a distant, foggy memory. It used to keep him up at night. How *alive* Robby made him feel despite how cold and detached like a cadaver he had been under his fiery, shaky hands.

Langdon isn't shy with his hands anymore.

He lets his fingers explore Robby's chest through the thick coat he's still wearing despite the July humidity. Squeezes the material over Robby's pecs, and he feels the muscle expand with laughter.

Robby brings a hand behind and pinches high on his thigh. He palms at Langdon's leg, and if they weren't in a dirty parking garage, Langdon would probably blow him right there.

He still might. It's not like Langdon's an employee of the Pitt anymore. He can do what he pleases now, and if he wants to grope Robby in the ER's parking lot, then so what?

Before he can actually bring that plan to fruition, Robby revs the motorcycle to life. In a blink, the motorcycle takes off, and they're quick to build speed out of the lot.

He tries to keep track of where they're going. Eventually, the street signs become a blur, and Langdon nearly falls asleep to the nice breeze and Robby's heat along his chest.

It's some unidentifiable amount of time later that Robby pulls into a parking lot outside some house. It's not Robby's place, and it certainly

isn't Langdon's.

It's the kind of house he'd pass as a kid and dream he'd one day afford. Large and two stories, maybe three with a finished basement, but not massive enough to be gaudy or tasteless. Lots of greenery lining the long driveway.

Massive brick stairs lead to the front door. Robby's scrolling on his phone as he walks up to them. Like it isn't bizarre for them to approach some random person's house.

"Ready?" Robby asks. He turns at the door to give him a smile.

It's dazzling, but not enough to deter him from the oddity of the situation playing out.

"Ready for what?" Langdon lets himself be roped in as Robby pulls him closer, hand-in-hand. "I don't know where we are right now. Are you trying to get me to help you ransack some rich asshole's house?"

"You talk too much, you know that? It was a simple 'yes' or 'no' question."

Langdon rolls his eyes. "Yeah, sure."

Why the hell not.

Robby takes out a key and turns the lock. Gestures for Langdon to go inside first. He takes a step in and is met with a massive arch entryway. Something astonishingly extravagant.

The lights are all off, but Robby, with something like practiced ease, finds the light switch and cloaks them in a gentle warm hue. He props himself along the hallway's frame, bicep smushing into the wall. Langdon swallows the nerves on his tongue.

"What do you think?"

He pads around, eyeing the layout. It's spacious. Cozy, even, if he lets himself sink into it.

"I think we just broke into someone's house." Robby moves to jingle the key in his hand, but Langdon stops him. "I don't know what you want me to say about that."

"I don't want anything from you," Robby says, slowly like it was the easiest question in the world. "Except your thoughts on the house."

“It’s….” Langdon doesn’t have a lot of words for the immense thing pounding in his chest. There’s a charm to the house he wasn’t really expecting. “I like it.”

“Good.” Robby palms him on the shoulders. Spins him around and starts leading him to walk down the hallway. “I want to show you something else.”

“Oh, yeah?” Langdon coos at Robby in his peripheral vision. “Like what?”

A flare of red burns on Robby’s face. He coughs before making them take a sharp turn into another room.

Even through the darkness, he can tell that the room opens up, the ceiling expanding much higher than he could possibly touch. There’s a faint echo to the cavernous room.

Before his eyes can adjust, Robby flicks another switch. He opens his mouth to comment on the living room. Someone beats him to the punch.

A roar of noises. Not a single, identifiable word comes from the crowd of people standing in the living room. Or at least, the ringing in his ears prevents him from hearing a damn thing.

They’re all, well most of them anyway, are clearly buzzed, drinks sloshing in their hands. It takes a hard second for him to recognize his *old* coworkers.

He *just* saw them, *goddamnit*. How did they get here so fast? He turns to Robby for answers, but his mouth just hangs open. Robby looks at him from behind, smile soft and distracting.

McKay’s the first to step forward, shaking Langdon by the shoulders. “Hey!”

“Hi?!” He shouts. Music starts blaring. It bumps in his ribcage. “What is this?”

“Uhh, your end-of-residency party, obviously?!” McKay shouts into his face.

Langdon has to steady himself, wincing at the sudden volume. He grips at McKay’s wrists on his shoulder. “You guys set this up?”

“Yeah!” McKay starts swaying to the beat of the music. Poorly, he might add, but he starts swaying with her. “Well, Robby did. And you know how we are. Love a good excuse to party.”

Langdon fully turns his head to look at Robby. It’s obvious now, how so full of pride he is. He’s not sure how he didn’t see it before. Maybe he was too blinded by his own self-doubt.

Robby’s got a tight grip on his neck. Leans in and plants a smacking kiss to his cheek. Doesn’t say a damn thing and walks away into the crowd that swarms around him like quicksand.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt your little moment in the hallway, by the way," McKay says.

The surprise that had been roaring loud in his ears has settled, nesting warm in his chest. It makes room for the realization that he had just made lewd innuendos to everyone’s boss in front of them.

He feels a heat crawl up the back of his neck, sweat building, but he can't tamper down the miffed smile tugging at his face, because, *of course* this happens to him.

“You heard that?” Langdon whispers.

“Yep.”

“Do you think everyone else heard?”

McKay’s grin is the only answer he needs. He tucks his chin, hiding the flush spreading across his face.

It’s embarrassing, but after turning the thought over some more, he realizes Robby sort of just paraded him around. Showcased Langdon as *his*.

He looks back up to McKay with big eyes. She nods at him, like she’s thinking the same thing.

“C’mon,” she says. “They got a karaoke machine hooked up by the TV.”

McKay drags him over to the living room just in time to watch Mateo and Princess sing a terrible rendition of *‘Where Have You Been’* by *Rihanna.*

The couch is stuffed full of people, a hoard of faces he recognizes as

Perlah, and Antoine, and Larry, and Donnie. They squeeze in at the end for a couple more songs.

At some point, Doll trots into the room, spawning from *somewhere*, and immediately jumps for Langdon. He has to tell her *'down'* four times before his command breaks through her excitement.

People start to gather around to pet her, cooing about how much of a *'good girl'* she is. Doll looks so pleased with the attention, she doesn't know who to look at first.

Langdon can't stand to watch *Freddie Mercury* be butchered, Langdon excuses himself from the karaoke session to find wherever they've got the alcohol stationed. It only takes one look at the kitchen island to see a line of bottles.

"You good to drink with…?" Robby asks casually as he slides up beside him.

Langdon makes himself a vodka cranberry, because apparently he's twenty-one again and has never ordered from a bar before.

"Yes, Robby, I'll be fine. Probably should have asked before you set this whole thing up."

Robby takes another swig of the disgusting beer in his hands. "You know how these things get. One bottle turns into two turns into seven. Besides, would've ruined the surprise."

He turns around, and the island digs into the low of his back. Just because he can now and the buzz of drinks and good company encourages him, he rests his head on the firm bicep beside him. Robby, back towards the room, turns his head to lean closer to Langdon.

"We're making a mess of this person's house," Langdon mumbles.

"I'm sure the owner won't mind," Robby says in return.

"You're being weird," Langdon states into his cup. "This your cousin's house or something?"

"I don't have any cousins."

Langdon looks up. "Really?"

Robby shrugs. "That I know of."

“Didn’t know that. But not the point. I’ll ask for a family tree later.”

“It’s more of a stick than a tree.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

Robby huffs. Leaned on the counter with his elbows, he throws his hands in the air in an attempt to appear remorseful. “Caught me.”

“Don’t tell me this is *your* place,” Langdon says with a laugh.

He takes a sip of his poorly mixed vodka cranberry. Waits for Robby to say anything, but when a few seconds pass without a word, he looks up to find Robby staring into his own cup.

Langdon’s eyes widen. “Wait, Robby. Is this *your* place?”

“You told me not to tell you that,” Robby argues eventually.

"Obviously that was a figure of speech of some kind."

He looks around at the open-concept floor. The high ceilings hovering over the cozy environment is something from a movie set. With Robby’s salary, of course he could afford a snazzy place like this.

Langdon just…sort of never thought about that. It’s obvious now when he’s surrounded by Robby's wealth. And dizzying.

“This place is awesome and all, but what’s with the sudden move?”

Robby shrugs. “The walls are much sturdier here. Good insulation.”

Langdon whacks a hand on his shoulder. After a puff of laughter, Robby lowers his head. Props his chin on a hand and turns away from Langdon. He stares straight ahead at the *very* nice cast iron stovetop.

“I walk into my house, and it’s just reminder after reminder about how you’re not there.”

It takes a moment for Langdon to process. His breath stumbles out of him. “You bought this place for…us?”

“And Charlotte and Tanner, when they’re with you.” Robby pauses, and adds quietly, “if you want.”

Langdon really can’t help the face he’s making. Mouth dropped open and eyes bugging out of his head.

“You bought us a *mansion*?”

Startled, Robby scoffs. “Well, the realtor didn’t mention this was a ‘mansion,’ but if that’s the word you want to use—”

“Robby, I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

Langdon can’t recognize the man in front of him. It’s such a jarring shift from the emotionally unavailable wall to…wanting to live together? He doesn't need to just be pinched awake. Someone needs to sucker-punch him across the room.

“You’re serious,” Langdon repeats.

“Yep.”

“You want to live together?”

Robby shrugs, like this isn’t a hugely sentimental move on his part.

“Doesn’t have to be that quick. Just that this way, we’re closer.”

At that, Langdon raises an eyebrow. “You drove for like half an hour. How are we any way closer to anything?”

They stare at each other, and Robby’s lip quivers. There’s humor glinting in his eyes.

“You didn’t see me circle the same street three times?”

Langdon bites his lip. “I fell asleep.”

“On the bike?” At Langdon’s nod, Robby shakes his head in disbelief. “I should have known when you didn’t question me taking the same U-turn twice.”

Langdon rubs a hand through his hair. There’s not enough time to dissect *any* of this. It’s so like Robby to spring this on him and act like it’s such a small gesture.

“Give me some time?”

Robby smiles into his cup. It’s husky and bitter. Maybe a beer of some kind. Takes a sip before saying, “I’m not going anywhere. Take your time.”

Langdon has to look away. He might rent a U-Haul tonight just at the sight of his smile. His hand finds its way to Robby's muscle and squeezes. Robby does the same to his hand before shooing him off to *'enjoy the rest of his party.'*

He's desperate for something to distract him, and his eyes meet Mel's across the room. She's stunned, but quickly works into a smile and a wave.

"Hi, Doctor Langdon!"

"You don't have to call me that," Langdon assures. "Langdon or Frank is fine."

"So, your first name really is *Frank*?" Santos comments from across the table they're all sitting at.

"What's wrong with my name?"

"What's *not* wrong with it?"

"Gee, thanks."

Mel doesn't seem surprised anymore by Santos' humor. She looks up at Langdon with that same bright smile.

"So, you're done with your residency. Do you have any plans now?"

"I'm doing an EM fellowship."

"That's amazing!"

Langdon feels himself relax. It's something natural in Mel that eases everything. "Thanks, Mel."

She nods, and they kind of just stare at each other, smiles reflecting. He's going to miss her simple companionship.

"Okay, fuck it," Santos cuts in, face twisting after a bitter sip. "You and Robby."

He feels his head ping with the conversation with Robby from just five minutes ago. Langdon clears his throat.

"Yes?"

They're quiet, tension simmering as they glare at each other. If she has

the balls to ask him to his face, she better say the full thing, *damnit*.

“Oh, I believe they are dating,” Mel adds, helpfully. “Right?”

Langdon can’t help breaking his scowl at Santos. “Yeah. We are.”

“Wow,” Santos says, with a low whistle. “So that rumor was true.”

“I kind of thought you two had been dating for months,” Whittaker comments.

Langdon snaps his head in Whittaker’s direction. “What?”

“Was this supposed to be a secret?” Javadi asks, genuine intent seeping into her tone. “I didn’t tell anyone, I just thought it was obvious.”

“Are you kidding me?” Langdon asks. His head’s starting to get dizzy with all these head-turning comments.

“Yeah, we all knew you were into that,” Santos says, elbowing him. “Congrats, by the way. Kind of gutsy to go after the boss like that.”

“It was a mutual affair, thank you,” Langdon grumbles.

The conversation needs to change. Now. Before he says the first thing on his mind. Maybe like how *Robby’s* the one who manhandles *him* in front of the whole department. Or that it’s definitely Robby’s M.O. to date his employees and not anywhere in Langdon's dating track record.

Something stupid that would definitely implicate both of them.

Langdon nods to the table. “What’s the game?”

The cards are lined up on the table in a singular line, with more cards layered down the line like frozen icicles hanging from an awning. Actually, when he tilts his head….

“Javadi, are you playing Solitaire at a party?”

Javadi’s head juts up, eyes blinking wide. Her hand pauses over a four of hearts. “Yes. Is that bad?”

“There’s a lot more fun card games to play with other people,” Langdon comments.

“I don’t really know any other card games,” she states. “I’m really good at Solitaire.”

“Everyone’s good at Solitaire. Here, hand those to me. I’ll show you a real game.”

Langdon teaches them how to play Bullshit. It’s an easy game with short rounds, but he picks it due to the fact he knows they’ll enjoy shouting *‘bullshit’* at each other—Santos, mostly, and Javadi, once she lets herself unwind.

Javadi’s poker face is stellar, and Whittaker’s expressions are pretty subdued as well. He does call Santos a liar on nearly every round, even though she miraculously somehow is never lying. Mel's pretty good at hiding under the radar, but he doesn't think it's a game strategy and more so just her natural expression.

After a few rounds, he excuses himself to circle around the room. Waves to Mel before spotting who he can talk to next. His eyes land on Collins and Dana.

Langdon saddles up to them, inserting himself into the conversation. Not that he’s really listening, but Collins doesn’t care. She continues to talk to Dana, swirling her glass of wine as Dana nods along. They’ve always been honest around each other, and he can appreciate company that doesn’t lie to him.

Once she’s apparently done, she bumps shoulders with him.

“Finally getting out of here, huh?” She says, smiling.

“Oh, don’t sound so upset,” Langdon says back. “I know how much I’ll be missed.”

“Not as badly as you’ll miss me.”

And, well. Fair enough. Watching each other evolve over a nearly five year period is hard to ignore. Even more difficult to act like that doesn’t mean shit to him.

Langdon bumps Collins shoulder back, and they rock side-by-side for a moment.

“Now I have to deal with Robby’s bullshit by myself.”

“What about me?” Dana scoffs, hands in the air.

“You have too much on your plate to be worrying about that guy,” Collins argues.

“Oh, it’s nothing I haven’t been seen before. Been dealing with that guy long before either of you’s started.” Dana turns to Langdon. She holds up her cup and says, “cheers, kid. I’m proud of you.”

Langdon ducks his head, a swoosh of hair blocking his face. Good. They don’t need to see the sudden sting in his eyes as he clinks their drinks together.

The rest of the night goes without a hitch. It’s a lively event, like a crowded bar on game night. Langdon socializes more than he possibly does during an actual shift. Just like the ER, he catches Robby’s eyes across the room, and it’s just as electrifying.

Shocking, that after all this time, Robby still gets his heart racing.

Once things die down, and people begin crowding into cars and Ubers, Robby shuts the door on the last of the guests. Langdon props himself in the hallway’s doorway.

It feels like a final bell rings when Robby turns to face him.

They don’t say a word to each other. Robby’s eyes follow Langdon as he marches up the stairs. His fingers curl up and around the thick handles of the railway. He hears footsteps follow him up on the padded staircase.

At the top of the stairs, several doors meet him. He doesn’t even try to guess which is which. It’s like some poorly designed booby trap from a maze.

“Bedroom’s on the right,” Robby whispers in his ear.

Langdon’s spine spikes up as he makes his way to the right-most door. His hand is heavy on the doorknob, and with a swallow, he opens it.

The bedroom isn’t decked out. Not yet, anyway. He has a feeling they’ll change that soon enough.

For what he’s about to do, he doesn’t need fancy decorations or matching curtains.

“The pillows are a nice touch,” Langdon adds out loud, because somehow Robby remembers the small things like the mountain of

pillows that help when his back aches first thing in the morning.

The door creaks, a slow and long croak, as it shuts behind Langdon. He turns around to see Robby posed against the door. He looks breathless. Without air and entirely alluring.

“You want to talk about the pillows all night or do something more productive with that mouth of yours?”

Fuck.

Langdon grips the collar of his own shirt in a desperate attempt to get this moving along, but Robby is quicker. He pushes Langdon’s hands away and keeps them at his sides. Then, reverently, his hands wander under his shirt and up the length of his chest.

They move as one, peeling off his shirt and tossing it somewhere. His heart is still hammering, but Langdon feels his breathing calm down as Robby works them through the motions of undressing.

When the back of his legs hit the bed, he’s clad in only his boxers. His eyes wander up, taking in the sight of Robby looming over him.

Despite the fact Robby is still dressed in his cargo pants and loose t-shirt, it’s not threatening at all. Comforting, actually, like a blanket shielding him from the cold. Something so clearly Robby-esque that eases the nerves bubbling in his core.

Langdon reaches out, tugging Robby in by the shirt. He huffs, but complies and steps closer. His hands wander up Robby’s chest.

“Take this off,” Langdon breathes.

Robby’s a much better rule follower than Langdon had expected. He crosses his arms at the base of his shirt to strip himself free of the damn thing.

In front of him, Langdon faces Robby’s bare stomach. Round, but firm. Enough to imply some hidden strength that could push him around if he so felt it. And bundles of curls in a T-shape from his chest to his stomach that leads under the band of his boxers. Langdon swallows, teasing his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Alright?” Robby asks in a huff.

Langdon doesn’t trust himself to not make a fool when he speaks, so

he nods. His hand plays through the coarse, greying hair.

In between stolen glances of Robby changing clothes and using his shower, he had been expecting a lot more hair. It's softer and thinner than he had imagined too.

A lot more fun as well. He loses himself in the sensation, mapping out Robby's stomach, running his fingers through the short curls.

A cough from above pulls him out of his thoughts. Langdon looks up, about to argue, before he's met with the glamorous sight that is Robby blushing. His face is lit with a fiery red from ear to nose to ear.

"Having fun?" Robby grunts, voice higher pitched than he's ever heard before.

Langdon nods again. "I wasn't done."

"I'm not done with you either." Robby nods his head up once. "Get on the bed."

Langdon's giddy as he scoots back on the mattress. Crawls back until he's at the center. Robby digs his knees into the bed and flattens a palm on his chest. He pushes until Langdon is laying flat against the mattress. The control he has over his body is hypnotizing.

Robby leans down to press a kiss to his mouth. After the first kiss, Langdon's brain is quick to catch up. He opens his mouth for a filthier kiss. He wants Robby to fuck his mouth with his tongue. Wants to know what Robby tastes like.

Even if they've kissed before, and despite knowing the drag of Robby's beard feels across his face, it's never been like this, with a fire roaring in his blood and a staticky *need* to be as close as possible.

It's obnoxious that Robby takes him apart at a much slower pace. Keeping his kisses to simple exchanges of lips. Every time Langdon opens his mouth to take a larger piece of Robby, he shies away with a simple pull of Langdon's bottom lip.

"Robby," Langdon grumbles.

Robby looks up with a smile, and *damnit*, the bastard knows what he's doing. Knows that all Langdon wants is to be used and torn to shreds, but that's not in the books tonight, apparently.

“We’ve waited a long time,” Robby says. “Let me have my way with you.”

“You’re driving me crazy,” Langdon grouses, flopping back onto the mattress.

It must feed into his ego, because Robby’s smirk only grows wider. Langdon glares at him. He sees Robby, crouched between his knees, nearly begging to have his way with Langdon, hands groping up and down like he can’t get enough.

“Yeah,” Langdon eventually says. “Okay. Do it.”

Robby’s smile turns sweeter. He pecks a quick kiss to his lips. “You’ll tell me to stop when it gets too much.”

“What do I say to get you to keep going?”

A kiss is pressed to his jaw. Langdon’s hand paws at the back of Robby’s neck. To push him deeper or closer or to move him or keep him in place. Langdon doesn’t know. There’s too many things he wants with so few plans.

“My name,” Robby mumbles against his neck. His voice is breathy and chills his spine. “I also take compliments and moans.”

What a dick, but apparently Langdon is into corny assholes, because he feels heat shoot south to between his legs.

Kisses get planted down his chest. Robby’s hands start in the opposite direction, curling around his hips and massaging the muscles upward.

Langdon’s hit with the memory from months ago, on Robby’s old couch. That fire from the mantle was nothing compared to the heat that fled south in his body at that moment.

With a similar heat spreading across his face, Langdon drags one of Robby’s hands up his stomach. Together, they move towards his pecs. Langdon holds Robby’s hand over his chest.

Robby gives him a dubious look. Sputtering, Langdon thumbs his own nipple with a shiver. A demonstration of what Robby should do.

Always quick on the uptake. Robby nudges his hand away. Both his hands grab his pecs.

“Want me to play with your tits?” Robby asks.

There's an air of laughter to his voice, and his language is *vulgar*, and, *fuck*, Langdon's stomach clenching. The heat builds between his legs as Robby begins massaging the muscle there.

His thumb swipes over his nipple once. Langdon's body jolts. Robby does it again, moving his thumbs in tiny circles like he's scrolling on a computer mouse.

"They're nice," Robby asserts. He lowers himself to one of them. His tongue is almost too warm as it plays over the mound.

Langdon's muttering '*aghh*'s over and over, and he can't get any words out. Just stupid little whines are his only response to Robby mouthing over his chest. *Christ*, he didn't know he could even *make* these noises.

Robby's lips move down, sucking into the skin that will surely turn a vibrant purple by morning. When he reaches his stomach, Robby's eyes flick up. Langdon nods, shimmying his hips to get this moving.

That's not what Robby wants though. He palms over Langdon's growing bulge. The cloth of his boxers are rough against his dick, but the warmth from Robby's hand gives him little sparks of pleasure.

When he looks down, he sees how pathetic he is. Hips hovering above the bed. Grinding into Robby's unyielding palm. His casual posture like he's reading a book on vacation and not driving Langdon crazy.

"Take them off," Langdon tries to order. It comes out more whiny like a plea.

"You want something?" Robby asks.

Such a tease, but Langdon knows how to play this to his advantage.

"Maybe," Langdon says. He plants his hips back on the bed with a deep breath. His shaky hand reaches inside his boxers. The heat of his own palm drives him crazy. It's obvious just how strung up he is if he's already twitching into his hand.

He curls a palm over his cock. The boxer fabric moves with an approximation of what he's doing. An imitation of what he needs Robby to do.

"Did you want something, or were we just going to kiss the whole time?"

“Fucking hell,” Robby mutters. His eyes are glued to his crotch, face lighting up with a blush.

He grabs at the waistband of Langdon’s boxers and yanks them down. Maybe, in some distant part of his mind, he’s embarrassed to be seen jerking off. The first, second, third, and fourth things on his mind though are completely removed from shame.

Especially when Robby slaps his hand away. The sting on his wrist lights him up like a spark of electricity. His body melts from the inside as Robby gets a hand on him.

Immediately, it’s familiar. Like all those fantasies Langdon’s had were actually Robby, and this is something they do often.

It’s clear that Robby’s trying to figure him out. With a slow hand and even more careful eyes, he’s cataloguing Langdon’s every reaction. Which is ridiculous, because Langdon’s not a very expressive person in bed.

At least, that was true about three seconds ago. When Robby palms one of his ass cheeks, fingers splayed wide and tight around his skin, just outright groping him, Langdon mewls.

It’s horrifically sensual and inviting and lewd that Langdon feels a blush set his face on fire.

It’s just a fucking handjob. He needs to pull himself together.

“Robby—” He chokes out.

The realization that it’s *Robby* driving him crazy and Robby palming his hand up and down Langdon’s cock and Robby perched between his legs like he’s the top of a mountain Robby has been climbing all his life.

It’s too much.

“You always this loud? Robby asks.

He feels his own head shake for him. “N—no, Robby—I don’t *know*.”

Langdon’s hips earn a mind of their own. They gyrate, stuttering up and down into the circle of Robby’s fingers. Robby doesn’t move his hand. Just lets Langdon fuck in and out of the fist he’s made. The sound of his precome slicking against Robby’s palm is loud in

Langdon's ears.

"I should let you do this every night," Robby comments, easy as anything. "Just give you something to rut against."

"You—" Langdon spits out. "Has to be you."

"Yeah?" Robby asks. The condescending lift to his voice trips the already quick beating of his heart. "No one else does it for you? Has to be me, huh?"

Langdon nods. He opens his mouth, but a breathy gasps falls out instead of words. It only takes a second to slap a hand over his lips. Robby's chuckle is too affectionate for this situation.

His hips start to stutter, jamming further into Robby's fist to the point there's no more room for him to move. There's something coursing in his blood that takes over his judgments. Tells him to fuck faster and faster.

Robby must understand. Surely as a warm blooded creature, he knows what he does to Langdon's body. He starts moving his fist, gliding a come-slick thumb over his head.

"What are you doing to me," Langdon gasps, voice clipping on a moan.

Robby's other hand helps push Langdon up and down. Still an unyielding pressure on his ass. He's everywhere all at once, and when he leans over Langdon's body, his cologne and natural body scent waft over him.

His entire presence blankets him. It's too much for his body. Whine on his lips, Langdon's hips slam up once. His come splatters over Robby's hand, slowly dripping down onto Langdon's stomach.

Before Langdon can recover, acknowledge the fact that his ex-boss just gave him the best handjob of his entire life, Robby crouches down into his space. He lifts his head up to watch Robby lap up the come that had smeared across his abs.

Fucking hell. Robby's body is lewd—and massive. Muscles of his back spanning wide as his arms block Langdon's legs.

When Langdon cups Robby's face, he looks up with dazed eyes. A man on a mission who can't be stopped. Being under Robby's attention will

always be an electrical short circuit to his brain. He brings Robby up with a pull of his face and kisses him.

It's not strange tasting himself on Robby's tongue, warm and salty and tacky, but the fact it's on *Robby's* tongue is a thought he replays over and over.

Langdon lets his hands roam down Robby's shoulders as they make out. Curls over the meat of his biceps and squeezes. He rolls them over so Robby's on his back, eyelids heavy, staring up at Langdon.

He swallows. What a goddamn sight.

"Can I suck your cock?" Langdon asks.

A blush blooms bright on Robby's face. Like he hadn't just toyed with Langdon's dick five minutes ago, telling him to fuck himself into his fist and chase after his own orgasm.

He's equal parts perverted and beguile, and that dynamic sits pleasantly in Langdon's stomach.

"Please?" Langdon pleads. He crawls up Robby's chest, hand spanning across his sternum. "I want to taste you, Robby."

"*Jesus*," Robby mutters. "This is going to be over quick if you keep begging like that."

Langdon shrugs. "It'll be the best thirty seconds of your life, I promise."

"Cheeky," Robby grumbles. His hands in his waist is encouragement enough.

"I can show you cheeky," Langdon coos. Sticks his tongue to the inside of his cheek just to be ridiculous. Robby's eyes jump to the bulge over his face. "If you let me."

They stare at each other, and maybe Robby's imagining it, thinking about Langdon's lips wrapped around him in worship, because somehow, the blush on his face spreads to his ears.

"*Fuck*," Robby swears. "Yeah, go on."

Langdon can't keep the glee off his face. With a grin, he pecks Robby's mouth before trailing down.

“Wait,” Robby stammers. He scoots them to the end of the bed. His feet plant on the floor, legs splayed wide. “This may be easier on your back.”

A pillow gets tossed onto the ground between Robby’s legs. Langdon looks up with a smirk. “I think you just want to see me on my knees.”

“It’s altruistic, I promise,” Robby says with a matching smile.

Langdon plops onto the ground. It’s actually one of the better days where his back isn’t hurting him, but the gesture is so considerate and full of thought that Langdon can’t say no.

He never really has the desire to say no to Robby, anyway.

It was a smart decision on Robby’s behalf though for reasons that he maybe doesn’t have or realize. When Langdon looks up, Robby’s *huge*. He fills Langdon’s entire line of sight with his beefy muscles of his thighs and round stomach and stupid heartful smile.

He also sees the tent in Robby’s cargo pants. And, *fuck*, if that’s just the size of his bulge, then he wonders how big he actually is.

“You got a stethoscope in there, or are you just happy to see me?” Langdon asks, tugging at his pants.

“Funny. Why don’t you find out?”

“Been trying to all night,” Langdon mutters, fingers curling over the band of both his pants and boxers.

Robby lifts up, but only a few inches. It’s enough for Langdon to scoot the clothing down. When he looks up, Robby’s cock bobs against his stomach, shiny at the tip.

“Not a stethoscope,” Langdon notes with a swallow. His lame joke lands flat, and there’s an unfamiliar tremor to his voice.

Robby fucking has the gall to smirk. Langdon would too if he was packing what Robby has. He doesn’t consider himself small whatsoever, average if he was being honest, but a side-by-side comparison with Robby would be an automatic loss.

Robby is apparently huge *everywhere*. Less length than he had anticipated and more on the girthier side of large. Curved too, smearing precome all along his stomach from where he's hunched

over.

It's a new challenge to overcome. A time to prove to Robby that there's nothing he can't learn. He'll get used to the technique.

He may need a second to recollect his scattering thoughts though.

Robby pushes one hand into Langdon's hair. He's so careful, fingers spread wide like he's detangling knots after a hot shower. Like he isn't about to watch Langdon suck him off. He's ever the patient mentor that Langdon's relied on.

He leaps up like a spring to kiss Robby's palm. Can't help himself when it's dangling right there, taking up half his vision.

"Good boy," Robby praises, fond and patronizing at the same time. He shakes Langdon's hair like petting the head of a dog after a job well done.

He feels a flush heat up his face. His cheeks must be glowing with the grin Robby's sporting, and *fuck him*, he needs Robby to say that again.

"Ready?" Robby asks.

He needs to wipe that stupid grin off his face. Langdon nods.

Settling a hand on Robby's thighs, he massages the muscle there. Can barely fit a third of his thigh into Langdon's hands, but Robby's muffled little sigh means it's doing something pleasurable.

He leans in, and Robby's scent is an immediate punch to his gut. Haywires his brain to act on autopilot and do whatever he wants.

Langdon starts by licking a long stripe up Robby's cock. He doesn't taste like much. Like sweaty skin with a hint of musk. He does it again, then another time, just to truly take in his taste.

There's breathy pants from above that encourage Langdon to take him in. It's much different from cunnilignus. Langdon has to drop his mouth wide open, yet at the same time, hollow his cheeks tight.

He tries emulating what people have done to him in the past. Runs his tongue over the slit as he bobs up. Robby's hiss of pleasure brings heat to his face. He does it again, and Robby's hand grows tight in his hair before relaxing, like he hadn't meant to do that.

"God, you are…."

Langdon pops off. A trail of saliva slaps across his face. He lets a hand run up and down Robby's length. Gives himself time to work out the ache in his jaw. It's been a while, alright? Since he's used his lips for something other than gabbing.

"You can be rough with me," Langdon says. Almost wants Robby to tighten his grip in his hair and use his mouth as he sees fit.

Langdon doesn't have a lot of experience with men. Or at all, if he's being honest. He doesn't need to feed Robby's ego by saying as much, but he's sure it's obvious.

Point being, if it's anything like the media he's consumed over the past few months, this should be moving…faster? Harder? Like being swept into a water vortex at the pool.

Robby's eyebrows knit together. Perplexed and even a little sad. Langdon looks up, pressing his cheek flush against the meat of his thigh, and Robby sighs.

"I don't want to be," Robby confesses. "You look so sweet down there."

And, well, he can't argue with that. Not with the shine in Robby's eyes or the kind little smile curled around his lips.

Fuck.

This means so much more to Robby than Langdon had ever realized. He wants to be properly romanced like a real partner. Nice and slow.

Locking his eyes with Robby, Langdon puts his mouth on his cock again. He lavishes with a slow pull up and then down. Robby's sighing, carding fingers through his hair, and his eyes are droopy and dreamy.

His throat isn't open enough to really take Robby in. As much as he's seen and watched other people do this, it's actually a lot harder in application. Go figure. So, Langdon substitutes with his other hand, palming languidly along the bottom half of his shaft.

Langdon feels Robby twitch on his tongue. Robby's hips start to tilt in little up-and-down movements. *He's close*. Robby's about to lose control of himself because of Langdon.

"Frank," Robby mutters. When Langdon looks up, his eyes are hazy,

like he's not even sure what's coming out of his own mouth. "You look so good. So good at this too—*shit*."

It shouldn't be such an obsessive thought, but Robby's praise motivates him to push through the ache in his jaw and take him deeper into his mouth. Hollows his cheeks to keep Robby right where he wants him, because Langdon's *good*.

The hand in his hair is firm, not rough or cruel. Almost pushing Langdon back, but Langdon slaps his arm, because he's going to swallow Robby down if it's the last thing he does. It's entirely possible that he *does* choke on Robby's come and needs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Heat spreads in his mouth with a heady taste, and it takes Langdon a second to realize Robby is coming down his throat. He feels the warmth dribble down his cheeks and slip down his chin. He mouths at the tip of Robby's cock, lapping at the rest of his come.

The hand in his hair grows tight, pulling Langdon away. He whines, staring up at Robby. His face is engulfed in red, mouth dropped open as he exhales a breathy sigh.

"Why'd you stop me?" Langdon asks.

He smacks his mouth to work the knot out of his jaw. Come collecting at the corner of his mouth falls on his tongue, and Langdon can't resist swiping along his bottom lip.

"You'd be down there all day if I didn't stop you, huh?" Robby exhales. His hand pets at Langdon's hair.

Langdon nods, feeling a tacky grin pull at his lips. All of Robby's attention falls on him, his eyes locked onto Langdon's tongue as his licks as his lips.

"C'mon. Up. I want you up here," Robby says.

Who is Langdon to deny him?

He hops up, and a line of fiery pain spikes up his legs. *Shit*. How long was he down there for? It only felt as if only a few minutes had passed, but his joins popping as he stretches tells him otherwise.

"Lay down," Robby says. Pulls Langdon onto the sheets and pulls the duvet over the lower half of his body.

It’s impossible to not follow along with Robby’s affection. He lets himself be taken care of, head clouded with a heavy fog of *desire*. To be closer to Robby. To run his hands up and down his body. To hear how *good* he was for him.

Robby appears beside him with a cup of water and ibuprofen. “Take these.”

“What's with the motrin?” Langdon murmurs through the haze of sleepiness consuming him.

“For your back.”

“I feel fine though.”

Robby coos a laugh. “Oh, trust me. You won’t feel so sunny in the morning.”

He watches his hand reach up and take the pills. When he drinks the water, his body is too heavy to lean up and take a proper sip. Water sprinkles down his face and onto the pillow.

Robby huffs, and takes the water away as he tries to inhale the rest of the drink. Has his throat always been this scratchy?

His eyelids glue themselves shut as he burrows his nose into the pillow. Robby’s scent is strong here. Almost as potent as the scent of his skin.

He really just put his mouth on Robby. His come is still sticky on his tongue no matter how much he wets his tongue. Even as Robby dabs at his mouth with a damp towel, Langdon can’t swipe the smile off his face.

"Was I good?" Langdon mutters.

The towel tugs at his bottom lip as the last of the moisture is dabbed away. Plucks the words from his weary mouth. After a second, a hand curls around his cheek. Langdon couldn't stop himself if he wanted to. He turns into the heat of the palm, nipping at the skin there.

"Better than I imagined," Robby whispers. "Better than anything."

Langdon feels himself smile against Robby's loving hand. That's all he needed to hear before sleep drags him down.

Langdon doesn't remember falling asleep. He emerges from a heavy fog with only the knowledge that he is not in his own bed. Not in Robby's bed at the townhouse either, but he knows he hasn't wandered into some stranger's house.

Robby's still at least in the room if the weight on his chest is anything. When he lifts his head up, the short strands of Robby's head come into view. His scruffy beard tickles his chest. The physical irritation of the prickly hairs dissolves into nothing when last night's memories fade into the front of his mind.

He slaps a hand over his mouth to keep himself from grinning. Can't cheese over a snoring old man that's sort of drooling over his chest.

That doesn't mean he can't card his fingers through his hair. Or wrap his arms as tight as possible around the broad length of Robby's back. It's hypnotizing to feel how the warmth of his own body seeps into each cold spot he presses into on Robby's back.

"—ophat," Robby grumbles, face turned into Langdon's chest. His arms around Langdon's chest grow stronger, nearly squeezing his bones into a powder.

"What?"

It's silent. Robby's a still body on top of him. Maybe he fell back asleep? Oh, well.

Langdon runs his fingers along the top of Robby's skull. Traces the pattern of hair and his widow's peak. Being close enough to see individual strands will never not get him going.

"Stop that," Robby mutters, voice a deep husk.

"Oh, you're awake."

Robby crawls up his body, plastering himself along Langdon's chest. He slots his head beside him on the pillow. Langdon turns his head and admires the view. Robby, annoyed and quiet, face smushed against the pillow and beard tickling Langdon's shoulders.

It's almost too much of a sight to handle.

The duvet gets dragged further up, and Robby tucks himself in deeper. He won't stop fussing with the blankets. Langdon huffs a laugh and curls the cover tighter around them.

With Robby wiggling around and their body heat, a warmth builds under the blanket that starts to drive Langdon a little crazy. He can't put a stop to his hips rutting up against the tight press of Robby's body.

His hand digs into the muscle of Robby's neck. Massages the skin there just to give his hands something to do that doesn't involve sneaking under the covers.

"You're awake too," Robby muffles into the pillow, voice husky.

Langdon's confused, because, *yes, obviously*? Robby curls a hand around Langdon's hip, pinning him to the mattress, and *oh*.

He's surprised himself by how much he wants to get his hands on Robby. Figure out what he likes to be touched and where his mouth should be to draw out those breathy moans. It's equally as shocking how quickly his own body is answering to Robby's smell and touch and voice. To his own desire to be the reason behind Robby's pleasure.

"Can I suck your dick?" Langdon asks into Robby's ear.

From so close, he gets the pleasure of watching the shell of Robby's ear flush red. When Robby pushes himself up to hover over Langdon, the blush spreads across his face.

"I'm not as young as you think I am," Robby grumbles.

"I never thought you were young."

"Brat," he mutters, and *fuck*, yeah maybe he is. Whatever Robby wants to call him in that scratchy, barely-awake voice, he'll be just that.

"Want me to teach you?" Robby asks.

Langdon's face surely twists with confusion, because Robby's smirking a little and it's too distracting for its own good, and he's not sure what exactly is happening.

"Teach me what?"

"How to give head."

Langdon's nod is a bit too eager. He cups Robby by the face and pulls him closer to kiss him. Robby lets him, just dragging their lips together, but then he moves his mouth down.

Kisses get sprinkled over his neck and collarbone. Robby's mouths at his nipples, and, fuck, he can't help rutting up against nothing, and sternum and stomach. Sucks a hickey into the skin of his thigh, and Langdon's so blissfully warm-headed that he can't stop the little gasps coming out of him.

"I was so jealous when I saw that bruise on your neck," Robby confesses into his thigh. He kisses the words into his skin like an apology.

"I know," Langdon breathes.

"Didn't think you'd want this."

How could he not? Robby looks so goddamn good between his legs, peppering kisses up and down his thigh. Just when he reaches the crux of his leg, right as the show's about to start, Robby swaps to his other leg and kisses his knee.

Reverence disguised as a new romance. Robby genuinely wants to adorn him with love.

"Always want this," Langdon whispers. Maybe it's true, and they've always been building towards this mountain. "Want to be so good for you, Robby. Just you."

Robby's breathy laugh tickles the hair on his leg. Sends the rest of his hair sticking up on its ends. "You are."

His mouth sets onto the bulge in his boxers that Langdon doesn't remember putting back on. It was useless to do so, anyway, because Robby's dampening the already formed wet spot with his saliva. His hands wrap around his thighs, brush up and down like he's idly petting an animal.

"Robby—"

He looks up through his eyelashes. The pink of Robby's tongue peaks through the tiny gap between his lips and the tent in Langdon's boxers. It's fucking erotic to watch him lap at just the mere shape of his cock.

Langdon falls back against the sheets and digs his palms into his eye sockets. Does Robby want him to *beg*? Inflate his ego with how much he needs Robby's mouth on him?

He'll do it. There's not a crumb of shame left if the end goal is Robby's mouth on him.

Apparently that's not in the books for this morning, because Robby drags his boxers down, carefully lifting each leg to slip them off entirely. His boxers plop somewhere on the ground, and it's the last thing he hears before his mind zeroes in on the lewd noise of Robby mouthing at the side of his cock.

With his eyes shut, he has to rely on his auditory senses to picture what's happening.

He can tell that the burn against the sides of his thighs isn't the rough callouses of Robby's hands. It's his *fucking beard*, and the foreign itch of hair scratching his thighs heightened the pleasure of Robby's mouth dragging along his length.

Sure, that means his tactile senses are all in working order, but Robby's touching him *everywhere*, and it's getting difficult to focus on one specific thing.

His presence fills the room and lingers on his skin to the point that he cannot differentiate between where he ends and Robby begins.

Lewd, slick noises fill the room as Robby takes him into his mouth. It's almost too easy for Robby, and Langdon would like to think he's not small enough to be an easy target. This is simply years of experience on display.

Langdon's hips buck up, horrified at how his body has shamefully taken control over his judgement. He feels the top of Robby's mouth, bumpy and so *goddamn warm*.

A sharp pain pinches his thigh. Langdon hisses and jumps up. When he looks down, Robby's pulling slow off of him, dragging his lips across his cock.

Fucking show off.

"What was that?" Langdon huffs. He feels himself blush at the high-pitched tone of his voice.

"Pay attention when I'm teaching you something," Robby instructs. His fingers move leisurely along his cock. Idle and uncaring of how needy Langdon feels. "You're one of my best students. I know you'll learn if you watch."

He wasn't kidding. Robby's *actually* turning a morning blowjob into a lesson. Does he not know shame? That their work dynamic shouldn't cross the boundaries of their romantic relationship?

His cock doesn't seem to agree with that. He twitches against Robby's face, which moves to smirk and plant a kiss at the base of his dick.

Shaky, Langdon nods, planting two hands behind him and gripping the blankets in an iron grasp. "I'm watching."

"Good."

The duvet gets shoved to the ground as Robby repositions himself flat against the bed. It takes him a moment of peppering kisses along his cock to set his mouth around him again.

With each bob of his head, he swirls his tongue around his tip. Robby's a quick learner, and *damn him*, using his experience to figure out which one of his many tricks that Langdon likes the most.

He's figured out that Langdon likes his head being played with more than any amount of deepthroating. Robby does both anyway just to show off that he's an excellent multitasker.

Not that Langdon had any doubt about his skills. He's been feeling an orgasm building in his core ever since he rutted against Robby's stomach earlier. How Robby had kept him still with just a single, commanding hand.

"Robby—" Langdon stammers. "I—*ahh*. I need to come."

Robby eyes open with his lips at the base of his cock. He flattens his tongue along the bottom side of him, and realization creeps closer with every twitch of his thighs.

"You want me to…?"

He can't even get the words out. Robby *wants* him to come down his throat. Actively has the desire to taste all of Langdon, and *holy hell*, he hadn't realized that was something he wanted to see until this moment.

Robby nods, miniscule compared to the long drag of his head along his length. Robby curls both his hands on either side of Langdon's hips. He keeps Langdon still, like he thinks he'd pull away at the last minute.

There's no way Langdon could do that. Push away from the magnetizing image of Robby's mouth bobbing up and down his cock? No fucking way.

His thighs squish Robby's face as they spasm. His hand flies up to his lip, and Langdon clamps down on his thumb to keep himself from whining. He feels his hip jump into Robby's face as his orgasm floods his body.

It takes a few seconds, and Robby's greedy as he mouths at the tip of Langdon's cock. He's entirely drained in more ways than one, but Robby's mouth is unyielding against his slit. His tongue laps at the taste of him that is no longer leaking out.

Langdon hisses, sensitive and fingers trembling. "That's—*gah*. Enough."

When he reaches for Robby with a shaky hand, Robby meets him halfway. He slides a large palm against Langdon's, curling their fingers together. Robby looks pleased as fucking punch as he rests his cheek against his thigh.

"Goddamnit, Robby," Langdon huffs.

Their thumbs pet each other in their hold. Moving in gentle circles.

Robby smiles, and there's wrinkles around his eyes that suggests that he used to do that a lot. Smile, he means, and maybe Langdon can get him to do that more now.

"You learn anything?"

Langdon hums, making a show of thinking real hard despite the fact his brain is mush. All he can feel is Robby petting his thighs.

"You may have to show me again," Langdon says, cheeky grin pulling at his lips.

"What a terrible student," Robby mumbles into his leg.

"I'm to blame for my professor distracting me?"

Robby kisses the top of his thigh before sitting up. Like this, glowing in the sunrise's light and brisk morning air, shirtless and indifferent about how he looks, Robby is a piece of art. From the top of his wild, spiky strands of hair to the broad shoulders that hold the weight of

their world.

Langdon throws his arms around Robby's neck to pull him into a kiss. He feels himself get dragged closer somehow, arms wrapped around the low of his back.

He tastes himself on Robby's tongue. Warm, salty, musky, tangy. Like sweat-stained skin. He's not sure what he must taste like. Probably not ideal. Like morning breath and lingering vodka cranberry and skin.

"We need to get up," Langdon mutters into Robby's lips.

Even this close, he can see Robby's eyebrows knit in something like despair. "It's our day off."

"Still need to eat breakfast."

"But I already ate."

Langdon stares blankly. The realization takes a second to hit.

"You-—" Langdon gasps.

With a sigh, he plants a kiss to Robby's smirk. Robby holds him there with a quick hand to his neck, and they don't attempt to leave the bed again for another ten minutes.

After he washes up in the bathroom, Langdon's horrified to read the clock on the stove. 10:28 AM. *Fucking hell*. He's not used to waking up so late in the day. It's practically noon already.

His bare feet against the wooden floor wakes Doll up from her nap. She stretches on her dog bed in the living room before scurrying to him. She runs circles around his legs as he tries to walk them towards the backyard door.

"Hi, girl," he whispers to her. "Yes, hold on. I'm letting you out."

Maybe it's because they're in a cul-de-sac, but the backyard expands wider than any he's seen before. Doll zooms past him to dig laps around the fenced-in yard. The trees beyond the fences provide a nice level of shade over half the yard, and Langdon takes a moment to soak in the beginnings of summer's heat.

His stomach twists with hunger, and *shit*, he was supposed to be making breakfast. He zooms around the kitchen, throwing pans in the stove and scourging through Robby's fridge.

Today deserves a feast, and at least it seems like Robby's prepared for that from the contents of his fridge.

As he thinks about what to make, he cleans up the kitchen a bit. Yesterday's company had the decency to not leave too much of a mess, but that does not mean a mess wasn't made. There's half-filled glasses strewn across the first floor and furniture rearranged into different rooms entirely.

After he stocks the bottles away and wipes down the counter, he starts melting some butter in the pan. He's decided on a scrambled egg bowl.

"If blowing you means free home-cooked meals, I may just do that every day," Robby says from behind him.

"I'd do this regardless," Langdon shoots back. There's a delicate intimacy of hearing Robby padding around the kitchen, drenched in the morning light, that makes him sappy. "You just sucked my dick, because you like me."

"Maybe," Robby agrees, and it's so casual that he stares at the pan before him with the stupidest grin.

An arm winds around his hip, like Robby can't stand to not be connected at some point. Even if he's just doing something as simple as making coffee.

Langdon looks over and, to his disappointment, Robby's clothed himself. A loose short sleeve shirt and sweatpants. His sleeve hikes up as he reaches for two mugs in the cabinet. His eyes spot something interesting.

"I didn't know you had tattoos," Langdon comments.

Robby's eyes widen, horror creeping in as he jumps between looking at Langdon and his arm. He rubs at the skin like the tattoos are washable ink.

"Just something stupid I got a while ago," he dismisses.

Robby moves to step away, but Langdon yanks him back with a single hand to his hip. He's not sure if he will ever stop obsessing over Robby's quiet obedience. Robby holds himself still, statuesque as Langdon examines the tattoo.

‘Memento Mori.’

Even if Langdon had taken Latin in high school—because his school counselor told him Latin classes often help students if they plan on pursuing medicine despite the fact he forgot most of his lessons straight after graduation—the phrase is too familiar not to know.

Remember you must die.

“Morbid,” Langdon says. His eyes trace the lettering. The ink is clearly old, as Robby had claimed, fading into the pale of his skin.

“True,” Robby replies. Either about Langdon’s comment or the statement of his tattoo. He’s not sure.

“Got any others?” Langdon asks. “Cute tramp stamp that says ‘unforgettable’?”

Robby’s face twists with indecision on whether he finds Langdon’s crude question funny or shameful. He shakes his head around before turning the opposite direction. Langdon’s about to yank him back again, but Robby stands still and slides the other sleeve up.

There’s another line of letters on his bicep. More Latin, but this time, hopeful.

‘Amor Fati.’

Love your fate.

“You get these together?” Langdon asks. He lets his hand reach out this time. He traces the ink, a much darker black than the faded colors on the other tattoo.

Robby shakes his head. “One year after the other.”

“You going to tell me the story behind these, or will you just keep letting me take vulgar guesses?”

A hand falls on his neck, bringing him closer. Robby plants a kiss to his forehead, leaving his lips hovering.

“One day. It’s not a happy story.”

“I don’t need fairy tales.”

“I know. I don’t want to ruin a good morning is all.”

Langdon huffs, but he curls an arm around Robby's back and turns to kiss his cheek.

"Sap."

Robby rolls his eyes, but he doesn't deny it. He lets Langdon continue cooking as he plants himself at the kitchen island with a mug of coffee. He placed Langdon's own mug next to him. Presumptious.

When Langdon fixes them both a bowl, he sets Doll's breakfast on the floor against the wall and takes his spot beside Robby.

"You know, I was thinking about getting a tattoo."

"Oh, yeah?"

Langdon digs into his bowl. He hadn't realized how ravenous he was until the scent of food wafted in front of him. He has the manners to swallow before talking again.

"Tanner and Charlotte's names on my arm. Somewhere that I could see to remind myself when shit gets tough."

"That's nice," Robby says before taking a bite. The pleased little twitch in his eyes lets Langdon know he did a good job with the breakfast.

"I was going to stop at this little place beside the road before I changed my mind. Wasn't the right time, you know?"

A fork clatters against the bowl. Robby glares up at him, and Langdon drops his own utensil in shock.

"You good?" Langdon questions.

"You were going to stop at just any place?"

"Well, yeah? It's a tattoo. How different can one store be from the one a mile down the road?"

"*Very*," Robby grumbles. "These shops have very different standards and artists. You need to do extensive research before picking a place, or else one day, you're going to wake up and wonder why you've got an infection."

"Alright," Langdon huffs. "I didn't know I had to be so picky."

“*I’ll* pick the shop,” Robby mutters. He takes a bite of the scrambled eggs before looking back up. “If you still want to get one.”

Langdon smiles. “Yeah. That’d be nice.”

Robby nods, and he looks back down at the news article on his tablet. Old man can’t go ten minutes without staring at his screen sometimes.

Well, whatever, Langdon thinks. It’s a nice enough day to just stay in each other’s company without needing a word from one another.

They spend the rest of the day lounging around. Well, it’s mostly Langdon falling in and out of a daze on the couch to the sounds of Robby moving around. His little grunts as he bends over to clean up from last night are like a lullaby.

Doll keeps thinking it’s time to play, and she nips and licks at Robby’s face every time he’s within reach. He only encourages her by actually playing with her each time, even if he's just pushing her around and muttering *‘stop that.’* She *loves* roughhousing with him.

He rocks awake when Robby plops onto the couch with a grunt. His legs have been repositioned into Robby’s lap, so the last cushion seat is open for him to sit.

Robby stares at the ceiling with heavy eyelids. Breathes out a little sigh of relief before toppling his head in Langdon’s direction.

“How would you feel about taking a vacation? Something fun before your fellowship starts.”

Langdon looks up with raised eyebrows. “A vacation? I didn't know you knew what that was.”

“I relax,” Robby argues.

“Now *that’s* a word definitely not in your vocabulary.”

“Are you going to keep being a smartass, or will you answer my question?”

Langdon rolls his ankles in Robby’s lap, thinking. Robby lets him. He places a cool hand to his shin, helping rock the limb back-and-forth.

“Could be fun,” Langdon says with a smile.

Robby huffs a similar smile. Subdued and reflecting more in his eyes than his mouth. “How about this weekend?”

Langdon frowns. “I’ve got Tanner and Charlotte, and I was going to take them to the local fair. Oh, yeah, they want you to come too.”

“Yeah?”

“You keep sounding surprised that my kids like you.”

“Just haven’t been around kids that often.”

“Well, Tanner and Charlotte like you, and that’s all that matters.”

Robby huffs a laugh. “I think they just enjoy using me as a monkey bar.”

The vivid memory of Tanner using Robby’s bicep as a bar to hang from while Charlotte sits cradled on his other arm like a parrot comes to mind. Langdon chuckles, because, yeah, that probably would be an ecstatic time for two five year olds.

“That too,” Langdon says.

They both grin at each other, before looking away. Somehow, they’re still bashful around each other. It’s a juvenile sort of crush that Langdon’s starting to think he’ll never get rid of.

Robby stares at the ceiling for a few seconds. “Got any plans for the end of the month?”

“Nah.”

“We could take a vacation then,” Robby says, casually like they’re discussing the humidity.

Langdon’s eyes bug out of his head. “You’re going to take time off of work…to hang out with me?”

The tiny crinkle on Robby’s face gives away his amusement as he turns to Langdon. His eyebrows are knitted up like he’s perplexed how they aren’t on the same page.

“Do I need to reiterate that we are currently seeing each other?”

“As many times as you want, baby,” Langdon coos.

Robby rolls his eyes, but there's a quiet blush rising to his cheeks. He calls that success.

"You are someone I want in my life," Robby starts. He's staring at the hole in his sock, before taking a sharp inhale and looking at Langdon. "Keeping you around means that I need to keep myself around too."

His words trickle into Langdon's head one by one. When they fall in line together, Langdon swallows.

Fuck.

He's really thinking about getting help, isn't he, and it's so fucking sweet and fills Langdon full of hope that he digs his teeth into his bottom lip to keep himself from tearing up.

"You going to actually look after yourself?" Langdon asks, voice thin and raspy.

Robby's little nod shatters his heart. Leaning up, Langdon curls his arms around Robby's neck and plants a light kiss to his lips. Robby's eyes clamp shut.

"We'll go wherever you want," Langdon whispers.

When Robby finally drags his eyes open, he's holding Langdon so gently in his gaze. Admiring and appreciating with a simple look that warms his blood to a boil.

"Maybe not *anywhere*," he adds in a hushed tone. "I'm not going cattle ranching with you, or some place in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere."

Robby's still staring at him, eyes narrowed and mouth clamped shut, and Langdon has a feeling that he should start recognizing that intense look in his eyes. It's the face he makes before he pounces.

He pushes Langdon into the cushions, hand sliding up his shirt and sending a chill up his spin. Robby buries his face in Langdon's neck, pressing quick kisses up his throat in a path towards his mouth

Langdon feels his laughter ghost across Robby's face. It's sort of ridiculous to fall into a fourth make out session before the sun has even set, but if that means Robby's pressing smiles into his skin and holding him close, then maybe he's just fine with wasting the day away.

Maybe their quiet happiness can be something they deserve.

Chapter End Notes

and tadaa! done! well not entirely. i have more stuff written for them already for this specific universe and also other universes, i just will be posting it as separate one shots and not chapters a part of this work if that makes sense.

thank you everyone for your continued support on this fic!! :) it means a lot to me and has kept me pushing through editing/ writing

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!